

The Flashing Dagger Technique

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Naruto masters a LETHAL jutsu and begins his climb into legend. Naruto X Sakura Yes,you read that right.

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Graduation

The seven year old Ino saw the little pink haired girl crying. She *thought* her name was Sakura but wasn't really sure. She recognized her from her other 'etiquette' classes that she and the other future kunoichi were required to attend. She'd never talked to her before and couldn't remember the girl ever saying anything of note. She was always gloomy and quiet and kept to herself. Though she wasn't even sure of her name Ino felt a little sorry for her and was on the point of going over to talk to her.

"Oooh! Look, Sasuke-kun is playing ninja with his brother!"

"He is?" Ino asked excitedly and hurried over to see. All thoughts of talking to the unhappy little girl forgotten.

It was the first day of the ninja academy and Sakura was sitting by herself as she got ready to eat lunch. She looked up a bit enviously at where Yamanaka Ino and a few other girls were eating with Sasuke. The boy was smiling and clearly enjoying the attention he was receiving.

She sighed longingly.

She had a bit of a crush on Sasuke like every other girl on her class. She knew it was pointless to approach him though. He was dreamy and cool and everyone adored him. Why would he be interested in an ugly girl with a huge forehead like her? No one even noticed her except when it was to mock her for her forehead or for her ability to answer most of the sensei's questions.

"Hey! Can I sit with you?"

Sakura looked up startled to see a little blond boy in a black T shirt and tan shorts standing in front of her. He had half a loaf of bread in

his hands and a wide smile. "You want to sit with me?"

"Sure!" He said.

"How come?" She asked suspiciously. She'd had boys pretend to be nice to her before just so they could play some mean joke with her.

"Because I think you're really pretty and I'd like to eat with you if I could."

She blinked, surprised by his blunt answer. "You're lying! Nobody thinks I'm pretty, they all say I'm ugly!"

The boy continued smiling at her and never batted an eyelash. "Who cares what people think? I think you're pretty. So can I eat with you?"

"Huh," for some reason she believed him. "Yeah, I guess."

He plopped down on the seat next to her and extended his hand. "I'm Uzumaki Naruto."

She took his hand and politely shook it. "I'm Haruno Sakura, and I already know who you are Naruto. You yelled out your name and that you were going to be Hokage someday at the start of class remember?"

"Oh yeah," he blushed slightly but still looked pleased at her reminder.

"Why did you say that? The others all laughed at you and I don't think Katumo-sensei was happy either." She had seen the boy a few times before, for some reason her mother had warned her not to talk to him. She didn't know why, he certainly didn't seem bad.

"I don't care what people think I am going to be Hokage one day. I let them know because I want them to acknowledge me and treat me with some respect."

She slowly nodded her head. She could definitely understand that. She also admired the courage he had in going after what he wanted without worrying about the response. She was constantly worrying about what people would think. It was then she really noticed that all he had for lunch was some bread.

"Didn't your mommy make you a bento?" She had a nice boxed lunch that her mom had prepared for her.

The boy's smile suddenly faded away and he looked down at the loaf in his hands. "I don't have a mom or a dad, I'm an orphan."

"Oh! I'm sorry!"

"It's ok," he told her. "Anyway I like bread. I'll have some ramen after school is over."

"Want to share my bento?" Sakura asked. "It's really good and mom always makes more than I can eat."

Naruto's eyes widened. Except for the old man he was unaccustomed to any kindness from people. No one ever physically hurt him, they just all ignored him and pretended he didn't exist.

"Really? I can have some?"

"Sure," she said.

As they began to eat her lunch he looked at her hopefully. "Hey Sakura, you want to be friends?"

She didn't need to think about it. She had no friends and he was being nice to her when no one else was. "Sure," she said. "I'd like that."

Four Years Later

Sakura returned from the other room with a hitai-ite around her forehead. She was walking tall and proud, she'd done it, she was a ninja now and an adult. As soon as he saw her her boyfriend gave a loud shout.

"All right! Sakura-chan! You did it that's great!" Naruto cried and jumped up and down.

"Oh quiet down you idiot!" Ino snapped. "Everyone who's taken it so far has passed. Obviously you'd have to be a total screw up not to."

"Which means you're in trouble Uzumaki," Kiba teased.

Shikamaru lifted his head off the desk just long enough to make a comment. He already had his hitai-ite tied around his right arm. "It means you're in trouble too Kiba."

The boy and his dog both growled at him.

Sakura sat down beside him and grinned. "Thanks Naruto-kun," she said.

Over their time at the academy they had tried to help each other. She helped him with his academics and chakra control and he was her practice partner for taijutsu and physical training. Over time she'd noticed the way most of the teachers ignored his questions and never seemed to spend more than the absolute bare minimum of time with him. She'd spent a *lot* of time correcting very basic errors in his stances and katas.

He amazed her with his absolutely relentless work ethic. He never seemed to get tired and he never got bored training with his body. He could go for hours running, doing exercises, throwing weapons, or doing anything at all that required physical effort. In that area he completely left her behind and outpaced everyone in class save for Sasuke.

He struggled with the academic side of things not because he was dumb, but because he simply didn't have any interest. His poor test scores kept him near the bottom of the class, though at least he wasn't dead last.

Kiba enjoyed that honor.

"I'll be up soon," he sounded confident but Sakura knew him very well and could tell he was nervous.

"Relax Naruto-kun," she reassured him. "You've passed the substitution and henge already, all you have to do is the bunshin and you pass."

"But it's my worst technique," he whined.

"Just do it like we practiced and you'll be fine," she promised.

"Right," he said trying to sound confident.

She smiled at him. "Hey for a future Hokage this'll be a snap." Anyone else saying those words would have been mocking him. Sakura believed in him and in his dream. She really did think that if he set his mind to it he could do anything.

"Yeah, Sakura-chan," he nodded. "How can I not pass?"

A few minutes later Shino returned from the other room, a hitai-ite in his hands. "Uzumaki, it is your turn," he announced in a monotone.

"Good luck!" Sakura planted a light kiss on his cheek which made him blush. "I know you can do it."

"Yeah! Thanks Sakura-chan." He hurried off to the testing room.

"Honestly Sakura," Ino called out. "How can you stand dating a loser like him? Sasuke is a thousand times better boyfriend!"

"And how would you know that?" Sakura asked sweetly. "Has he ever even held your hand or told you you looked pretty? Never mind actually going out on a date."

She and Naruto had been going out for a little more than a year now. They had not yet actually kissed yet but they had held hands and been on plenty of 'dates' to get ramen or see a movie together. The two of them were the only actual couple in the class.

Ino glared at the girl. The two of them weren't friends or rivals, just classmates. She really hated being reminded though that she and Sasuke weren't actually dating... yet. "Sasuke-kun will definitely be my boyfriend some day!"

"Don't count on it," he said with an annoyed tone.

The class erupted in laughter as Ino turned an embarrassed shade of red.

"All right Naruto," Iruka said with a friendly smile. "Please perform the bunshin jutsu."

He took a deep breath. *Just like I practiced with Sakura*, he reminded himself. "All right!" He said confidently. He ran through the hand signs. "**Bunshin no Jutsu!**"

The entire room filled with smoke and both Iruka and Mizuki were coughing. As the smoke dissipated Iruka saw the room was packed with Uzumaki Narutos, there had to be at least a hundred of them.

"Naruto! You only had to make three!"

The original scratched the back of his head and looked a bit sheepish. "Uh, sorry sensei. I have a lot of trouble working with small amounts of chakra. Sakura suggested I just use more chakra and make more clones since that's easier for me."

Mizuki chuckled. "Trust Sakura to see the simple solution to the problem."

"Uh, so do I still pass?"

Iruka nodded his head. "Of course you do, the requirement was three functional bunshins and you more than met that. Dismiss your clones and come up to accept your hitai-ite. Congratulations Naruto, you are now a ninja."

"Yahoo!" He shouted joyously.

Mizuki smiled and pretended to be happy for him while secretly cursing on the inside. He'd received an order from Orochimaru to steal the Forbidden Jutsu scroll from out of the Hokage Tower. He'd had hopes of using Uzumaki as a cat's paw. Instead he would have to try and steal it himself.

When Naruto returned he strutted in with his hitai-ite tied around his forehead. All the previous worry now completely forgotten.

Sakura jumped up and pumped a fist in the air. "Way to go Naruto!"

Hearing that he puffed out his chest and felt really happy. Some day the whole village would acknowledge him. For right now having just one person do it was enough.

All thirty students passed the exam and were enrolled as ninja of the Hidden Leaf. As they left the academy Sakura was holding Naruto's hand. Some of the other parents sent him some of their usual dark looks or else deliberately looked the other way. This once Naruto refused to notice and simply basked in the satisfaction of having become a ninja and an adult.

"Congratulations honey!" Mrs. Haruno gave her daughter a hug.
"You too Naruto, I'm very happy for both of you." She gave the boy a

hug as well.

Sakura's parents were both civilians and had been less than thrilled at the growing friendship between their daughter and Uzumaki Naruto. Over time though they had come to accept it and even developed a fondness for the boy. They liked him well enough that they did not object when their daughter declared he was her 'boyfriend.' Through the Harunos Naruto had gained a slight family life. He still had his own apartment and gorged at Ichiraku's at every opportunity. He also ate dinner with Sakura's family once or twice a week and was welcomed to hang out with her in her room. (So long as he door remained open.)

When he began dating Sakura he abruptly stopped pulling pranks. He didn't want to do anything that would embarrass her or make her parents wonder if he was trustworthy. He still wore orange and still sought attention, but he reigned in some of his more outlandish behavior, and was just a little more serious.

"We're going to have a feast to celebrate the two of you becoming ninja." She eyed Naruto knowingly. "Including ramen of course."

"All right! What are we waiting for then?"

Sakura laughed as he tried to hurry them along.

In his office Sarutobi nodded happily at the report that Naruto had passed his exam. Though his academic record didn't really reflect it Naruto had greatly improved over the last year and begun showing signs of becoming a real ninja. He had improved enough in fact that Sarutobi had decided he would give the boy a very special graduation gift.

He looked at the scroll that had not been opened in 12 years. Inside of it was an original jutsu created by the Yondaime Hokage.

The Flashing Dagger

"Found it!" Mizuki held the forbidden scroll in his hands. He was eager to get away as fast as he possibly could. He counted himself immensely lucky to have sneaked into the Tower unobserved. With a little luck he could be on his way to Oto before the scroll was missed and the hunter nins sent out.

"What are you doing here Mizuki?"

Mizuki swallowed, recognizing the Hokage's voice. He palmed some shuriken and turned around to see the Hokage standing not ten feet away. He did not look especially angry.

"I am sorry Lord Hokage but I have orders to retrieve this scroll. I'm afraid I can't let you interfere."

"Oh really?" Sarutobi lifted a single eyebrow.

In the next instant Mizuki felt a hundred kunai piercing his body.

Sarutobi watched as the former instructor shook and collapsed wordlessly to the floor. This was the difference in ability between a Chunin and a Hokage. Just a little focused killer intent had been enough to deal with the man.

"Bring him to Ibiki; I want to know who it was who gave him these orders."

In an instant a pair of ANBU materialized at his side. "Yes Hokage-sama," the one with an owl mask replied.

Sarutobi picked up the scroll and put it back in its proper place. "Oh, and have Naruto report to me."

"Yes sir," the other ANBU replied.

Naruto was back at his apartment with a full belly and a content grin. He was busy shining his hitai-ite. Tomorrow he was having his picture taken for the yearbook and the day after he would be getting assigned to his team. He and his classmates were being divided up into standard three man squads. That meant the chances of Sakura-chan being his teammate were 2 in 29. He desperately wanted her on his squad, not just because she was his girl but because he was used to working with her. They were already natural partners and would be perfect as teammates. He also just liked the idea of being able to see her every day.

I wonder if Iruka-sensei would be open to a bribe.

There was a sudden knock on his door. When he opened it there was an ANBU in a ram's mask standing there. "Please come with me Naruto, the Hokage wishes to speak with you."

"Whatever it is I swear I didn't do it!"

The ANBU sighed. "Just come along."

"Congratulations on your graduation Naruto," Sarutobi told him.

"Thanks old man," Naruto said happily.

"I have a special graduation present for you."

"If you want to treat me to ramen I already ate, but you can treat me tomorrow."

Sarutobi grinned at him. "What I have in mind is a little bit better than ramen Naruto." He produced a jutsu scroll and handed it over to him. "That is yours now."

Naruto took it eagerly. "A jutsu scroll? Awesome!" He opened it and looked at the title scrawled along the top of it. "Senko Tanken no Jutsu. Flashing Dagger Technique, well that sounds more interesting

than a bunshin or henge at any rate." Naruto began to unroll the scroll and frowned at it, there were a *lot* of symbols and instructions to it. "This looks awfully complicated."

"It should, this is an S-rank jutsu Naruto."

"S-rank? Seriously?" His voice was quivering with excitement.
"You're giving it to me?"

"It's yours," Sarutobi confirmed. "However to guard against theft you will not be allowed to bring it home with you or make any copies or notes either. It will be kept here at the Tower under lock and seal. I will leave special instructions that you are to be granted access to study it at any time you like. I do not expect you to learn it immediately Naruto, it will undoubtedly take you many months if not years to be able to perform it."

"Don't you have any faith in me? I'll have it down in a week, two at the most." He sounded very certain.

Sarutobi shook his head. The young always believed they could do the impossible. Only time and experience would show them they had limits. "If you can manage that I will be very impressed, but don't be upset if the going is a bit slower. Take your time, there is no rush."

"Can I start studying this right now?" He asked.

The Hokage nodded his head approvingly. "Of course, the ANBU outside my office will escort you to the room where it will be kept. Study it as long as you like. Just remember you can't bring it home with you and you can't take any notes or copies of it either."

"Right! Thanks again old man, I'm going to make you proud!"

"I don't doubt it Naruto."

His work finally done for the day the Hokage headed home and to bed. As he did so he recalled the first time he's been shown the jutsu, the Yondaime's last original creation.

Twelve Years Earlier, Six Months Prior to Kyuubi's Arrival

"Another new jutsu kid?" Jiraiya shook his head. "Where the hell do you find the time?"

"It's something I've been thinking about for awhile," the Yondaime replied. "It's a variation of Hiraishin, but it's made to cover its weak point."

"The Flying Thunder God Techniques *has* a weak point?" Sarutobi asked. That jutsu had defeated entire armies. It certainly didn't seem to have a weakness in it.

"It does," Minato said seriously. "Hiraishin requires seals in order to be used. That means that until those seals are placed it's useless. If a number of enemies managed to get in close to me it would be no help at all. This is meant to compliment Hiraishin; it's designed specifically for close in fighting. Finishing it seemed even more important now that Kushina is going to give me a son."

"Why so?" Sarutobi questioned. "You're not planning to go out on missions are you? The Hokage's place is inside the village."

"No," the Yondaime replied. "It's because I'm going to have a son who may be able to use this as well as Hiraishin one day. This is much simpler and can be learned first."

"You're going to declare this a clan technique like the Hiraishin?" Clans were permitted to reserve techniques that were specific to them.

"I think I have to," Minato replied.

Jiraiya snorted. "The kid thinks his ability to teleport is tied into a blood line."

"A kekkei genkai?" Sarutobi said startled. "But the Namikaze have never had a blood line."

"We never had one that we knew of," Minato corrected. "However it seems the only explanation as to why I can perform it but no one else can."

"The kid tried to show it to me," Jiraiya admitted. "But no matter what he tried to do it was impossible for me to make it work."

Minato nodded. "If Jiraiya-sensei can't learn it I doubt anyone else can either. That's what makes me suspect there may be a bloodline limit involved, one that permits the use of chakra for teleportation."

"That's an interesting theory Minato," Sarutobi admitted. "Though it's not one we can really test."

Minato shrugged. "Well not until Daisuke gets a bit older."

"Daisuke?"

"It's the name Kushina and I are leaning towards."

"Personally I still think 'Little Jiraiya' sounds better."

"No sensei."

Sarutobi returned to the Tower early the next morning. As he was headed to his office a tired and bleary eyed Naruto came out to greet him.

"Hey old man," Naruto said and tried to stifle a yawn.

He frowned at the boy. "Naruto," he said sharply. "Have you been here all night?"

"That's right," Naruto answered and covered another yawn. "It took all night but I'm done."

"I told you there was no rush. You're going to have to report directly to the photographer's studio to take your picture. After that get some sleep. You can study it some more later."

Naruto shook his head. "I'm done studying it."

"Yes, for now you certainly are. Don't push things, you have time."

"No, I mean I'm **done** studying it. I've learned it."

Sarutobi stared at him blankly for a moment, certain he had to have misheard that. "What do you mean you've learned it?"

Naruto shrugged. "I mean I've learned it, it was kind of hard but I think I've got it down now."

"Naruto that was an S-rank jutsu! There's no way you could master it in one night!"

"Well I *said* it was hard," he answered defensively. "Don't you have faith in me?"

"Naruto it is not a matter of faith, some things are simply impossible."

The boy pouted and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm telling you I've got it down."

Sarutobi stared at him. It was absolutely ridiculous. Even if the boy were a genius (which he definitely was not) it would be impossible.

Still...

"Would you like to give me a demonstration?"

Naruto nodded. "Sure thing."

"Give me an hour to set it up, in the mean time take a nap in my office."

"These are some weird looking kunai," Naruto said.

Over his orange jump suit he had two 'belts' crossed, each holding fifty sheaths, each sheath filled with a tri-kunai. One hundred total.

"These are necessary to make the jutsu function," Sarutobi told him.

They were out in the middle of training ground 15. Around him Naruto had a ten wooden training dummies planted in the ground. The dummies were made of straw and had various types of armor tied to them ranging from plain leather jerkins to chain mail to one with steel plate that samurai favored. All the dummies were within ten yards of him at staggered distances.

"Now are you still sure you can work this?" Sarutobi asked once more.

"Sure thing," Naruto answered confidently.

"All right then, wait for my signal then do your best."

Sarutobi walked about thirty yards away to where a small group of Jonin were waiting. He'd asked them to come along to bear witness. He was sure Naruto could not have mastered this jutsu in one night. Even if he was only partially successful though that would be amazing.

"So what sort of wild goose chase have you got for us?" Asuma asked as he lit a fresh cigarette.

"I'm sure it will be very interesting whatever it is," Kakashi said as he looked down at a little orange book.

"Do you have to read that in public?" Kurenai asked.

"Yep."

Sarutobi sighed. "This will not take much of your day, so please all of you pay attention. That includes you Kakashi."

"Hai Hokage-sama," he momentarily looked up from his book.

Sarutobi waved his arm. "Whenever you are ready Naruto, go ahead."

Nodding he did it. There were no hand signs required, just a specific intention and use of chakra.

"Senko Tanken."

There was a flash of yellow.

Naruto did not vanish. He remained in place and visible. Instead a bubble of yellow light appeared around him for just an instant. It formed a perfect sphere stretching out exactly ten yards with him at its center. They witnessed the flash and then it was gone. In the next instant all ten straw dummies, their armor, and the wooden posts disintegrated. That was the word for it, one second they were there the next they were not. The only thing left standing in that space was Naruto.

Sarutobi stood there with his jaw hanging open stunned.

Thump.

He looked back to see that Kakashi's book had slipped from his hand. Asuma's cigarette had fallen from his open mouth.

"Unbelievable," Kurenai whispered.

Naruto waved over to them and shouted out. "Told you I could do it."

The dummies and everything else had been chopped up into tiny pieces. The posts were piles of wood chips. Asuma bent over to pick up a square inch piece of steel plate. He carefully examined the sides. "There's not even a scratch," he muttered. "This is tempered steel and it was reinforced with chakra, and it still got cut this neatly. Just how fast were those blades moving?"

Kakashi had been examining several of the tri-kunai, taking them out of their sheaths at random to investigate their edges. "They feel a little warm but I can't find any damage to the blades at all. They cut through steel and wood without even being marked up."

"It's a perfect attack," Kurenai said. There was a little awe in her voice. "Anything that gets within ten yard of him dies, period."

All the others nodded their heads in agreement.

"Pretty awesome huh?" Naruto preened under all the positive attention.

"Naruto," Sarutobi asked. "Is there any way you could limit its effects?"

Naruto frowned, not really understanding the question. "What do you mean old man?"

"Could you use it say to just disarm an opponent or just wound him?"

Still frowning Naruto shook his head. "I can't control it like that," he said. "It's like flipping on a switch, it's either on or it's not."

"I see," Sarutobi answered. "In that case I am going to set two conditions for you to use this jutsu."

"Conditions? I just learned it and you..."

"Naruto!" Sarutobi said angrily getting his sudden and full attention. "This jutsu is one hundred percent LETHAL! You have just admitted that you cannot alter that. Since that is the case you will not be

allowed to use it at any time you wish. There are two conditions that must be in place first."

Seeing he Hokage angry was intimidating. Naruto meekly nodded his head. "Uh, okay, what are they?"

"You may **never** use this unless you are sure your sensei and teammates are at least fifteen yards away from you. Develop some kind of code phrase to let them know you are about to unleash it so they do not try and get near you at the wrong moment."

Naruto nodded, he could see the sense in that. "Okay, and the other one?"

"Only use it against people who are trying o kill you," he replied. "Which means I expect you will **never** have any reason to use it against a fellow Leaf shinobi. You are not allowed to resort to it merely to win an argument or a fight. If I ever learn you have broken either of these conditions you will arrested and charged with murder. Is that clear?"

Naruto again nodded. "Yes Hokage-sama, I understand."

Sarutobi nodded solemnly. "I am proud of you Naruto, what you've just done goes far beyond all my hopes. I have no doubt at all that you *will* put this jutsu to goods use against the enemies of Konoha."

"Maybe he'll even earn a nickname like the Yondaime did," Kakashi put in. "'The Flashing Dagger' or something."

"The Flashing Dagger?" Naruto said and slowly began to grin. "I like that."

Team five

Twelve Years Ago

"So how does this auxiliary to Hiraishin work?" Sarutobi asked.

The Yondaime took out one of his tri-kunai. The special weapon had his tracking seal engraved right into the blade. "You know that what separates Hiraishin from other similar jutsus like shun shin is the fact it involves actual physical teleportation, whereas shun shin merely allows for faster movement."

Sarutobi nodded.

"Just as important Hiraishin allows me to act at a speed akin to that of the speed of light. It would not be anywhere near as fearsome if I were forced to act in real time. That is how I can defeat entire armies in the blink of an eye. I am literally able to be in hundreds of locations in the same moment and able to act . I can kill a hundred different targets in the blink of an eye, provided I have a seal in place to direct me."

"Yes, how is Senko Tanken different?"

"Well essentially it's a short range reversed Hiraishin."

"Reversed? I'm afraid I don't understand."

The Yondaime again held out the tri-kunai. "When I use Hiraishin I use my tri-kunai or other seals to guide my movement. They remain in place while I move instantaneously, able to be in a hundred places at once. With Senko Tanken I act as the seal mark while I send my tri-kunai moving at an ungodly speed. I push out and concentrate my chakra in a ten yard area about my body, creating a temporary seal. I then teleport my tri-kunai out to cover the entire area. As with Hiraishin the tri-kunai move at an ungodly speed and can be everywhere in a single breath. When the jutsu is complete they

return to their sheaths. Everything within ten yards of me is sliced to pieces. Moving at the speed they do they should be able to cut easily through even steel or solid granite."

Sarutobi tried to imagine it, kunais everywhere in a single instant, moving as fast as light. "It sounds like a terrifying attack; I certainly can't imagine any defense to it."

"Well, just like Hiraishin it's a very powerful technique, but it does have weak points."

"I take it distance is one of them?"

Minato nodded. "Ten yards is the effective limit. It may be possible to make the area of effect smaller, but not larger. Since this is meant to work in tandem with Hiraishin that isn't a real problem."

"What are the other weaknesses?"

"Well one is that it will only affect enemies or objects that can be cut. Jutsus that allow a person to take on a liquid or gaseous form will be unaffected. The other is the nature of the temporary seal. The chakra has to be allowed to flow freely in order to work. In other words it can't pass through solid or semi-solid material like earth, water, or walls. If it were to be used within a room for instance it would only effect the area of the room, the area beyond won't be affected even if it's within the ten yard range. It also won't penetrate the ground or water I'm standing on, so enemy shinobi with earth or water jutsus remain a threat."

"I see," Sarutobi nodded. "Within these limits though this new jutsu appears quite fearsome."

"Yes, it's made for killing." He let out a regretful sigh. "I had hoped my son would not have to be immersed in killing as I had to be, but I suppose that was always a hopeless dream. In this world of ninja there is no avoiding it. I will just have to teach him what it means to kill."

"With you there to guide him I am certain he will be fine."

An exhausted but very happy Naruto had gone home to rest. He had missed his session with the photographer but that could be rescheduled for later.

Sarutobi had a much more important problem to deal with. Who would be Naruto's Jonin instructor? Iruka had already formed the students into squads and Sarutobi had no objection with his choices. He'd received regular reports about Naruto from both his academy teachers and from ANBU observers. He was well aware of the strong ties he had formed with the Haruno girl. It was general policy that if students formed close ties while in school those were usually maintained when teams were formed. They naturally helped create the strong bonds and teamwork essential to an effective squad. The third member of the squad would fit in well and likely not offer any major disruptions.

The problem was deciding who should be sensei.

Part of a Jonin's duties included hardening the new shinobi to the harsh realities of ninja life. This naturally included the fact they would be expected to kill. Under normal circumstances it would be at least a year or longer before a new team would be trusted with a mission where bloodshed was likely. The unexpected was always possible, but a ninja usually had time to adjust before killing became necessary. Given whom Naruto was though and the nature of his new jutsu Sarutobi suspected that day would come sooner rather than later. He would need a Jonin who could prepare him, even if that meant his treatment was bit harsh.

He would also have to be given a little more help in one other way. At the moment Naruto knew only four jutsus. The three D-rank ones all academy students were required to know and an S-rank one he was not permitted to use except in life and death situations. He would need at least one more that could be used in non-lethal combat.

Sarutobi thought he had the perfect one in mind.

The door to his office slammed open and a young boy with a scarf leapt through. "On guard old man!" The boy tripped over his scarf and landed on his face.

"Young Lord!" Ebisu cried in mild panic.

Sarutobi sighed, when would his grandson out grow these silly challenges? "Hello Konohamaru."

As they usually did Naruto and Sakura met on the way to the academy and walked into class together. He was bursting to tell Sakura about what had happened yesterday with his new jutsu and how the old man and the Jonin had talked about how amazing it was. Unfortunately he had been warned not to, at least not yet.

Yesterday

"Naruto," the Hokage spoke to him. "For the time being keep this new jutsu a secret. I want you to wait until your new sensei gives you permission to demonstrate it for your teammates. They'll need to understand what you can do in order to be ready to work with you. However even after that I want you and your team to keep this ability secret."

"That's not fair!" Naruto burst out. "I get this awesome new jutsu and I'm not even allowed to brag about it?"

"Naruto! Secrecy and deception are at the very heart of being a shinobi! Going about thumping your chest is a game for children. You are an adult now. A real ninja does not brag about his abilities, quite the opposite he will do everything in his power to keep them secret." Sarutobi could see how frustrated the boy was to hear that.

"But... but I want people to know what I can do! I want people to acknowledge me!"

The Hokage put a hand on his shoulder. "I acknowledge what an amazing feat it was Naruto. So do the ten Jonin who witnessed it, every one of them was impressed with you. You **will** be acknowledged and treated with the respect you deserve, but you need to be a little patient. As your career goes on I have no doubt at all you will become a very great and well known ninja."

Hearing that from the Hokage made it a little easier to keep what he'd done under wraps.

"Hey Sakura-chan, what happens if we end up on different teams?"

"We'll just deal with it as best we can I guess," she replied. "Even if we're not on the same team we'll still see each other when we're in the village." She gave him an affectionate hug. "Don't worry too much; I'll still be your girl no matter what."

"Good," he said with relief.

"What are you worried?" She teased. "Afraid someone might take me away from you?"

He looked over to where Ino was playing up to Sasuke as he tried desperately to ignore her.

Sakura followed his gaze and smirked. "Oh, that's right maybe I'll end up on his team and I'll fall in love with him."

"Don't joke about that," Naruto said. "You and Hinata are the only girls in class who aren't fan girls. And you used to have a crush on him."

"That was before I realized he didn't have a soul," Sakura told him. "Naruto no matter how good a ninja he may be there's something

wrong with him. He never smiles he never laughs and he has no friends, not even one. I would never want to be with someone who doesn't know how to laugh and make me laugh." She gave his arm a squeeze. "I like boys who are warm and affectionate and aren't afraid to tell me they like me."

Her touch made him feel slightly and made him very happy. "Man I really hope we end up on the same team."

Yesterday

After dealing with his grandson's challenge he had sent for the ninja who would take over Naruto's team. He'd asked all ten potential senseis to the demonstration so when he announced the last minute change the reason for it was fairly obvious.

"So you want me to turn Naruto into a little killer, eh?" The Jonin had a wide too friends smile. "Sounds like fun."

"I want you to turn him into an effective ninja," Sarutobi replied.

"One who's willing and ready to kill, got it."

"Given this new jutsu it's inevitable that he will have to kill at some point. It's better for him that he be ready when that time comes."

The Jonin happily chuckled. "Well assuming the gakis can actually pass my test I'm certainly the one for the job."

When Iruka arrived the students quieted down.

"Mizuki has been assigned an important mission from the Hokage so I'm afraid he can't be here today, I have no doubt he would wish all of you the best in your careers just as I do."

The students all accepted that without a second thought.

"I will now read out your team assignments. Before I do please keep in mind they were made by me with the idea of keeping all the squads in relative balance. I gave due consideration to all factors and my decisions are final. As shinobi you will be expected to accept whatever missions and teammates you are given. You are all ninja now, no matter what your feelings please do not try and argue with me to try and get a certain teammate."

He deliberately looked at Ino.

"Also keep in mind attempted bribery of a public official is a criminal offense."

Sasuke snorted and Ino sank deeper into her chair.

"After I have read out your assignments you are free to have an hour long lunch. Return here to meet your new senseis."

He then began reading out the assignments beginning with team one.

"Team five, Uzumaki Naruto," Naruto and Sakura both tensed up. "Haruno Sakura," that was as far as he was able to get.

"Yahoo!" Naruto shouted.

"Oh yeah!" Sakura cried pumping her fist in the air.

Iruka gave them an amused look. "Okay, calm down you two. The third member is Aburame Shino. Your sensei will be Mitarashi Anko."

Naruto and Sakura both looked over to Shino. He was easily the quietest boy in the class and rarely spoke to anyone. Unlike Sasuke though he had no reputation for being rude to anyone, he simply didn't engage much. The boy turned in his seat and nodded politely to his new teammates.

Iruka continued.

"Team seven will be Hyuuga Hinata, Inuzuka Kiba, and Uchiha Sasuke."

"Noooooooooo!" Ino wailed.

Sasuke looked ever so slightly relieved.

"Your sensei will be Hatake Kakashi," Iruka continued over the girl's sobs. When he announced she would be in team ten with Shikamaru and Chouji with Sarutobi Asuma as sensei she was not made any happier.

"All right everyone have a good lunch, when you return you'll be introduced to your senseis."

Naruto and Sakura approached their new teammate.

"Shino-kun," Sakura said. "We're going to Ichiraku's to get some ramen. How about you join us?"

"Yeah, we can start figuring out how to be a kick ass ninja squad," Naruto said excitedly. Since he had Sakura on his team he had no doubt team five would be a great unit.

Shino nodded his head politely. "I agree that would be a good way to begin forming team bonds."

Hinata nervously approached Sasuke. "Ah, Sasuke would you..."

The boy stuck his hands in his pockets and walked past without even acknowledging her.

Kiba came up to her looking annoyed. "I see we're off to a great start as a team."

Hinata turned to him. "Ah, Kiba would you like to have lunch with me? As... as new teammates I mean." He gave her a wide smile and she felt her face blush a little.

"Sure Hinata-chan, sounds good."

When they all returned from lunch there were nine Jonin in the classroom waiting. In order they called their teams down.

After team four departed a woman in a trench coat and a fishnet shirt stepped forward. Naruto recalled she was one of the ones the Hokage had brought out with him. He didn't remember her saying anything, though her outfit had definitely been memorable.

"Team five!" She shouted. "Get your sorry butts down here!"

In short order the three of them were standing in front of her. Looking them over her smile was a bit... predatory. "Okay gakis! My name is Mitarashi Anko and as far as you are concerned I am kami herself! Now let's go!" She chuckled and Naruto felt ice run down his spine. "This is going to be sooooo much fun, for me at least."

Anko's test

Anko took her new team to an empty section of the academy courtyard. She sat down on a swing and motioned for them to sit as well. She took out a kunai and began to twirl it about one finger. (A habit of hers her team would quickly take for granted.)

"Okay, to begin with I'll give you a quick introduction to let you know who I am. My name is Mitarashi Anko a Tokubetsu Jonin who specializes in stealth and assassination. I didn't want to be a sensei but the Hokage ordered me to accept a team and so here I am."

"If you don't want to be our sensei then why are you even here?"
Naruto complained.

In a flash the kunai leapt from her hand. None of them saw her throw it and they first realized she had when they heard the soft 'thunk' of the blade going into the ground. Naruto felt a slight sharp pain and something warm dripping down his cheek.

Also faster than any of them could see she was suddenly bending over from behind him. She was casually holding another kunai to his throat as she licked the blood from his cut. "Watch that smart mouth of yours gaki, it'll get you killed one day." She slowly licked his cheek swallowing up every drop. "Mmmmm, fear always makes the blood sweeter."

Naruto froze, not willing to move a muscle or make a sound with the kunai against his throat.

Sakura twitched. *She's drinking his blood?! What kind of sicko is she?*

Shino looked on and merely raised a single eyebrow.

Satisfied she'd gotten their full attention she let go of him and returned to the swing.

"To answer your question I'm here because I was *ordered* to be here. As ninja you are expected to carry out all orders from those above you in the chain of command. Whether you like them or not, even if you hate them and think them wrong you are still expected to obey. If you can't handle that hand in your hitai-ites right now and quit."

She waited for a moment but no one responded. Naruto was rubbing his cheek and openly glaring at her.

"No takers huh? Well that's fine, but remember what I told you, as ninja you're not allowed to pick and choose which orders you're going to follow. Now let me set you straight about something right from the start. Up until this point you've all just been playing at being ninja. You've been coddled and shielded from all the harsh realities of shinobi life. Well that ends now. You're not students anymore and I'm under **no** obligation to keep you safe. My own sensei was a sadistic bastard, but he was also a genius and a great ninja who taught me a lot and made me what I am. He always got results no matter the cost."

She looked the three of them over.

"*If* you remain my team you won't always like me. Hell I can guarantee you'll hate me a lot of the time, but I *will* make you powerful ninja." She chuckled. "Or I'll get you killed, one or the other though, you definitely won't be weak and ordinary with me as your sensei."

"What do you mean 'if' we remain your team?" Sakura asked cautiously. "Does that mean we might be assigned another sensei?"

"That would be good," Naruto muttered beneath his breath.

"Don't get your hopes up pinky, it's me or nothing."

"Then what did you mean by 'if'?"

"I'll explain in a little bit. Now normally the sensei would have each team member introduce themselves and talks about likes dislikes and that sort of thing. I'm not one to follow the normal path though and anyway I've read all your files so I think I have the basics covered."

She looked at Sakura. "Haruno Sakura," she said so sharply the girl jerked. "Class rank 4th, top kunoichi, taijutsu average, ninjutsu good, weapons average, chakra control excellent, chakra reserves low, physical stamina average, academics excellent. It's safe to say of the three of you you're the best student."

She straightened up a bit. "Cha, thank you sensei."

Anko gave her a wide smile. "Too bad you're not a student anymore. You're the weakest ninja and the most likely to get killed."

"What?"

"Academics aren't of much use in the field. It *is* good to be smart but you're going to need to work on your physical skills."

She shifted focus. "Aburame Shino, class rank 12th, taijutsu average, ninjutsu average, weapons average, chakra control good, chakra reserves medium, physical stamina average, academics good. You're just about middle of the road, like a lot of clan members you rely on your clan techniques. It's good to have them as an ace in the hole, but don't neglect your more general abilities."

Shino gave a single slight nod.

"Uzumaki Naruto, class rank 28th, taijutsu poor, ninjutsu poor, weapons poor, chakra control average, chakra reserves," she chuckled. "Damn near unlimited, physical stamina excellent, academics poor. You are by far the worst student, but like I said school is over. You are already the strongest ninja here and with my help you can be really scary before long."

Sakura's eyes widened a bit. She loved her boyfriend to death, but it felt as though the whole world had been flipped upside down. She had always been one of the best; her teachers had always been full of praise. Naruto had always struggled; it had been a challenge just to get him to pass each year. Now she was the weak one and Naruto the strong one? She didn't resent it as much as she found it hard to comprehend.

"Well, now that we've got that out of the way it's time for me to give you your test to see if you're actually ready to be ninja."

"Huh?" Naruto chimed in. "What are you talking about we've already passed our test to be ninja. See?" He jerked a thumb towards his hitai-ite.

Anko snorted a laugh. "Yeah right, that little test you took was just to see if you were at least competent to be a ninja. *This* one determines whether or not you get to be Genin. Oh, and it has a 66.66% failure rate. So only three of the ten teams formed today are likely to pass it."

"What happens if we fail?" Sakura asked nervously. No one had ever mentioned a second test, it didn't seem fair.

"The failures go right back to the academy for six months of remedial training before they're allowed to test again."

"No way!" Naruto said angrily. "No way did I finally get through all that just to go back! I'm going to be a great ninja that everyone respects. Then one day I'm going to be Hokage and everyone will have to acknowledge me."

Anko looked at him closely. "Is that what you want gaki? To be Hokage so that everyone will have to acknowledge you?"

"That's right!"

"Then what?"

"Huh?"

"Becoming Hokage is very difficult, it's damn near impossible. Though you might have a real shot at it."

"You think so?" Naruto asked her. In the whole village only Sakura and the old man ever said they believed he could be Hokage. Even the small handful of others who were nice to him; Iruka, Ayame, Teuchi, and Sakura's parents tended to just smile and nod when he talked about it. They obviously thought it just a childish dream he would one day grow out of. That was why it surprised him when his new sensei nodded and sounded serious.

"Yeah I do, even if you're a bit of a screw up now I can see in your eyes that you have the one thing you need to make it that far. The sheer will to do *anything* you have to. You'd be amazed how far that alone can take you. You also have the chakra reserves from hell and the little stunt you pulled the other day shows you're definitely more than you seem to be."

Sakura looked at him questioningly. *Little stunt? What is she talking about?*

"What I want to know though is what are you going to do once you are Hokage and everyone has acknowledged you. Are you going to use your authority to make the villagers suffer for ignoring you for so long?"

"Of course not," he snapped. "I'll protect them just like the old man does. I love Konoha! I just want the villagers to love me the same way, that's all."

"Glad to hear it, if you really mean that I doubt I'll ever have to assassinate you."

"What?"

She stood up. "On your feet gakis!" She barked at them. "It's time for us to go and begin your Genin test."

"What sort of test will this be sensei?" Sakura asked.

"There's no set test for this. Unlike with the academy each Jonin instructor creates a test designed to teach a particular lesson that ninja need to understand."

"Which lesson do you intend to impart on us sensei?" Shino asked in a dull monotone.

"You'll see."

"This is some kind of joke right?" Naruto asked. "You're giving us rabbits?! What the heck does that have to do with being a ninja?"

Anko had taken the three very surprised nin into the village to a local pet store. There she had instructed each of them to pick out a bunny rabbit to keep as a pet. She had then bought them the rabbits along with cages and feed.

"Never underestimate the power of the cute and furry." She began to pat the brown and white one in Naruto's hands. "He's soooo adorable. What's his name?"

"Mr. Floppy." Naruto said, even as he looked a little embarrassed.

Anko smirked but kept petting Mr. Floppy.

"Sensei I have to agree with Naruto." Sakura said. "I know from Kiba that animals can be used by ninja, but none of us have that specialty and from what I hear from Kiba it takes years of training to develop the necessary bond."

"True," Shino spoke without meaning to. He was looking at the rabbit in his hands without any special interest.

"You'll understand tomorrow pinky. You'll all bring your new pets with you to training ground fifteen by 8 a.m. Oh, and what have you named yours?"

Sakura sighed, not understanding at all. Unlike the academy this had no rhyme or reason. "I'm calling him 'Chibi.'"

Anko nodded her approval. "What about yours?" She asked looking at Shino.

"I will not be giving him a name," Shino replied dully. "I suspect it would be pointless as would be developing any sort of attachment."

"What are you talking about?" Sakura asked.

"I see one of you has the ability to look underneath the underneath," Anko said sounding very pleased. "However keep your thoughts to yourself until we take the test tomorrow."

"Yes sensei."

"Well then, you're all free for the remainder of the day. Take good care of your new pets and be sure to play with them. I'll see you all tomorrow for your test."

She vanished in a swirl of wind and leaves.

"What was that about Shino?" Sakura asked. "Why don't you want to give your rabbit a name?"

"You heard sensei's order. I will explain my reasons at the test, if they are not already evident by that point." Taking his rabbit, cage, and feed he walked away.

"Whatever," Naruto said. "Hey Sakura-chan want to bring Chibi over to my apartment to play with Mr. Floppy for awhile?"

"Sure," she said. "And what was that, 'little stunt' sensei mentioned?"

Naruto looked uncomfortable. "I'm not allowed to talk about it until sensei says I can. Sorry."

Sakura frowned. "Since when do you keep secrets from me Naruto-kun?"

"Since I got orders to," he answered truthfully. "I'll tell you when I can I promise."

"I don't like this; all of a sudden everything is a big secret."

Naruto smiled and rubbed the back of his head. "Welcome to ninja life."

"I guess."

"Come on let's go play without new pets!"

Neither of them had ever had a pet before and they spent most of the afternoon at his apartment playing with them.

The following morning the three ninja met up at training ground 15. Sakura and Naruto arrived together about fifteen minutes early. Shino was already there waiting for them.

All three had brought along their rabbits as instructed.

At precisely 8 Anko arrived in a swirl of wind and leaves. "Glad to see all of you came here on time and with your rabbits. It's good to see you can follow instructions. Since that is the point of this test."

In a flash she threw three kunai into the ground at their feet.

"Now I want each of you to take that knife and chop off your bunny's cute little head."

Real ninja

In a flash she threw three kunai into the ground at their feet.

"Now I want each of you to take that knife and chop off your bunny's cute little head."

There was a momentary silence.

"Say what?!" Naruto shouted.

"You can't mean that!" Sakura cried.

Shino meanwhile simply picked up the kunai. "Hai, sensei."

"Shino! You're not actually going to do it are you?" Naruto demanded.

He gave Naruto a single nod. "I am."

"How can you?" Sakura asked. She was stroking Chibi.

"It is simple, because I have received an order to do so."

"Which is the point of this," Anko said approvingly. "In the field I'll expect you to carry out my orders instantly and without any hesitation. If I tell you to kill someone I'll expect you to do it; not look at me and whine. If you can't even kill a rabbit am I supposed to believe you can kill a human being?"

"But this isn't like killing an enemy ninja!" Sakura argued.

"What? You think that'll be easier? " Anko shook her head in amazement. "I hate to break this to you pinky, but ninja kill. Did they never mention that at the academy? Does it come as a surprise?"

"I know ninja kill!"

"Okay then, what's the problem?"

"Why should we kill them though?" Naruto asked. "The rabbits haven't done anything!"

"So only the guilty rabbits deserve die huh?" Her laugh was short and nasty. "Let me share a little secret with you. Something they probably forgot to mention back in school. Ninja don't just kill bad people; we kill who we're ordered to or whoever we have to in order to complete the mission. If the target happens to be surrounded by a bunch of children and taking him out means taking out some of them, you do it. Sometimes the target will be an innocent woman or child."

"That's a lie!" Sakura shouted. "Konoha would never do anything like that!"

"Right, because we would *never* accept a contract for an assassination of anyone who wasn't a criminal or somehow deserving it." Looking into Sakura's and Naruto's wide eyes she could see they really did believe it.

"Tell me something pinky, when you practiced throwing kunai at the academy did they use human shaped targets?"

"Well of course!"

"And were there bull's-eyes for the head, throat, and heart?"

"Yeah," Naruto said.

"Why do you suppose that was?" She asked pleasantly. "It was to teach you to aim for the killing points of the human body. Didn't it ever occur to you that the target you'd be throwing at wouldn't always be a ninja? That it might be a civilian? Somebody's wife or mother? You have been taught to kill people, not just other ninja."

Naruto and Sakura shared an uncomfortable look. Throwing kunai at targets was such a routine thing they had never thought of that.

"We were taught how to fight other ninja," Naruto argued.

"And to kill them?"

"Well... yeah."

"So if you were fighting an enemy ninja you could kill him?"

"Sure," Naruto said confidently.

"But you won't kill a rabbit?" She asked with a sneer.

"It's all right to kill if you have to," Sakura said. "If you're fighting and its life and death."

"That's the thing," Anko said pointedly. "You *won't* always be forced to. Assassination, by its very nature, involves killing when your target is no threat to you, who may not even know you're there. Ideally they should die without ever even knowing they've been killed. Let's say there are guards and you have the chance to kill them without them being able to put up a fight. Are you not going to take them out just because you're not already fighting them?"

"Couldn't we just knock them out?" Sakura suggested.

"Not always," Anko told her. "There are times when killing is safer than incapacitating. And you're still missing the point. Killing is one of the three basic functions of ninja. We kill, we steal, and we spy. Sure we occasionally do other things like provide security or conduct searches, but basically killing, stealing, and spying are the reasons ninja exist. Normally those are considered to be criminal acts. Being ninja is by its very nature immoral. A ninja's honor comes not from what they do but from their loyalty to the ones they serve. So long as you are loyal and obedient then *any* act is acceptable." She

grimaced. "Just so long as you never betray those you are supposed to be loyal to."

Frowning she looked back over at the two of them.

"Being a ninja you will do plenty of things you won't be proud of, but you do them to serve your Hokage and your village and your teammates. I need to be able to know that when I give an order I can count on you carrying it out to the best of your ability, whether you agree with it or not."

She then gave them a demonstration.

"Shino! Kill your rabbit, now!"

"Hai."

Holding the rabbit firmly with one hand he brought the kunai down on its neck with the other. The kunai's blade was razor sharp and cut clean, but even so the rabbit gave a single high pitched squeal as its neck was cut. Its feet kicked as its head was cut off and fell to the ground. Blood spouted out of the open neck spraying onto Shino's jacket and arm.

When it was done he tossed the dead rabbit to the ground.

Naruto and Sakura both looked sick. At the sound of the other rabbit's squeal both Mr. Floppy and Chibi began to shake nervously and they had to hang on to keep them from leaping away.

"You pass," Anko said simply. "You're a Genin now. Even if these other two wash out I'll train you to be a great ninja."

"Thank you sensei."

"That was horrible!" Sakura said.

In a flash Anko grabbed the girl and was shaking her back and forth. "Horrible?! What the hell do you think it's going to be like to kill a

person? Do you think that's going to be easy when you can't even stand watching a rabbit die?"

"Let go of Sakura-chan!"

She sent Naruto a hard look that silenced him.

"I hate to break this to you future Hokage, but being ninja involves doing a lot of hard and dirty things that you will *not* want people to ever hear about. We do things we don't like and don't enjoy because we have to. It's a dirty job sometimes, but it's a damn important one. **We** keep the village safe. **We** provide the money that makes the village run. **We** fight for each other and protect each other no matter what! **That's** what it means to be shinobi of the leaf! And if doing that means you get your hands bloody and make yourself sick now and again that's just the price you have to pay."

She let go of Sakura and stepped back.

"It's a hard life; I can't imagine anything that's harder. Not everyone can do this, but that's part of what makes it so worth doing." She looked at both of them with an intense and honest gaze. "If you become ninja, real ninja, what you do will *matter* but this is the price. Are you willing to pay it or not?"

She crossed her arms and set her jaw. She'd said all she was going to. It was up to them.

Naruto looked at Mr. Floppy. His pet was staring up at him with big innocent eyes. He thought about his life and about everything he'd endured up until now. About all the sacrifice he'd made and about what being a ninja meant to him.

He swallowed and reached down to pick up the kunai.

"Naruto," Sakura said softly looking on.

"I want to be a ninja Sakura-chan. I want to be a ninja more than anything." His voice was sad but certain.

Looking on Anko silently nodded her approval; it was fine if it was hard for him, so long as he actually did it.

He did.

He brought the blade down in one quick clean motion.

The rabbit's head came right off with almost no resistance. Unlike Shino's his never let out any squeal. The blood splattered on his orange jacket and some splashed on his face. It was warm.

He let go of the rabbit and turned away from Sakura as he threw up.

"You pass; you're a real ninja now." Anko said without any mocking tone in her voice. She looked at Sakura. "What about you?"

Sakura looked to wear Naruto was bent over. She looked at Chibi who was resting nervously against her. She cared for the little rabbit. But not as much as she cared for her boyfriend. She couldn't let him down.

She picked up the kunai at her feet.

She tried to make it quick and clean as the two boys had, but her hand was shaking and when she brought the knife down it didn't cut all the way through. Blood splattered onto her face and her red outfit from the partially torn neck. Chibi let loose a series of high pitched terrified squeals and was madly trying o get away. Sakura was forced to get a better grip to hold on to him before she could try and finish. In his pain and terror Chibi bit at her hand.

Naruto moved to help but Anko waved at him to stay where he was.

Gritting her teeth Sakura brought the knife down a second time. This time she kept her hand steady and the kunai's blade went clean

through. Chibi's struggles stopped as first his head and then his body were dropped to the ground.

Sakura looked at what she had done and began to silently sob.

Naruto came over to hug her. She put her head on his shoulder and gratefully dried against him.

"You pass," Anko said. She offered no word of sympathy. When her sensei had made her do this he too had refused to comfort her. She knew this was cruel, but the shinobi world was cruel and shielding them would be dangerous. She would make them strong ninja even when it meant they hated her guts. "You are all officially Genin now, congratulations."

"What happens now sensei?" Shino asked in his usual emotionless voice.

"Usually a rookie team would waste a lot of time doing D-rank missions like walking dogs or weeding yards. I don't believe in that nonsense. You're all dismissed for the day; I want you to enjoy it. It'll be your last bit of freedom do the next month."

Naruto looked at her nervously. "What are we going to do?"

"Bring all your ninja gear and camping equipment with you and report to Training Ground 44 tomorrow at 6 a.m. Be sure to tell everyone that you won't be seeing them for awhile. For the next 30 days you're getting survival and ninja training from hell. By the time we're done you'll be ready to go on real missions."

She vanished and was gone.

What you can do

"So we're Genin now," Naruto said over a slowly cooling bowl of ramen.

"Yep," Sakura agreed. She was also just staring down at her food.

"I'm going to have to get rid of the rabbit cage and feed."

"Yeah, me too now that I think about it."

There was a long painful silence as they both just sat there quietly staring at their ramen.

"Is there something wrong with your orders?" Ayame asked worriedly. "Normally you two would be chowing down, especially you Naruto."

"There's nothing wrong with the food Ayame-chan," Naruto assured her.

"It's just that something really bad happened today," Sakura explained.

"What? What happened," she asked nervously. Though a civilian she lived in a ninja village and understood that tragedy could occur at any time.

"We became Genin of the Hidden Leaf," Sakura said morosely.

Ayame had a confused look. "Well isn't that a good thing?"

"You would think so," Naruto sighed.

Neither of them volunteered to tell her the details of what had happened and she decided not to ask.

"What are you going to tell your folks about Chibi?" Naruto asked.

Over the last couple years he'd come to the conclusion that his living arrangements gave him the best of both worlds. He was free to drop by and visit Sakura and her family whenever he liked, but was able to come and go from his apartment without giving anyone notice or explaining himself when he made a mess. (Well to a point, Sakura forced him to keep his place neat or she wouldn't come over.)

Though Sakura was now an adult her parents still had a curfew for her and expected to know where she was at all times. That didn't look like it was going to change any time soon. They would certainly ask about what had happened to her new pet.

"I'll just tell them I was forced to let him go. I'll say that was my test."

"So you're going to lie to your mom and dad?" Naruto was a bit surprised. While she didn't tell them everything she did try to be as honest with them as she could and avoided lying.

Sakura didn't look happy, but she nodded. "I have the feeling this is just going to be the first of a lot of lies I have to tell them. Do you think they'd understand if I told them what really happened?"

Naruto knew the answer to that and shook his head. Another truth about ninja life was starting to dawn on them. They would be doing a lot of things they wouldn't be bragging about. Things that only their fellow shinobi would be able to understand.

"Funny how Iruka-sensei and the other teachers never mentioned any of this," Naruto noted.

"Welcome to ninja life."

Naruto gave a sour grunt. "Yeah, I guess."

He took his chopsticks and had some ramen. He was a little surprised that it was still as good as it had always been.

Konoha had 105 designated Training Grounds. They varied in size and in terrain. It was possible to train in forest, grassland, swamp, hills, mountains, and training ground 88 even had an entire town where you could train for urban missions without putting civilians in danger. The only sorts of terrain that were unavailable were arctic and desert; for obvious reasons. There was a Civil Engineering Corps staffed with ninja proficient in nature and earth jutsus who constantly repaired the damage of intensive training and kept the training grounds in pristine condition. The people and shinobi of Konoha took great pride in their Training Grounds. It was simply taken for granted that just about *any* sort of terrain could be used and maintained.

Even so, when team 5 arrived at Training Ground 44 they were a little surprised.

There was a fifteen foot high chain link fence topped by barbed wire. Beyond the fence were massive deformed trees that easily dwarfed everything else around them. Beneath the think canopy of tree leaves was an absolute jungle. The heavy vegetation covered everything and made it impossible to see more than ten feet beyond the fence. In the early morning light there was a fragment of mist rising up from the ground filling the place with a gloomy pall.

Naruto thought he saw something in some of the bushes. When he looked more closely it had disappeared. Whether it was gone or just better hidden he could only guess.

The three of them had actually agreed to meet inside the village before the sun came up and had arrived together as a single unit. Sakura was surprised when Naruto showed up with two belts of kunai criss crossed over his chest. They were all bringing extra weapons with them but that seemed kind of excessive. They were all laden down not only with all the weapons they could carry but with their backpacks and tents. After just a couple meetings with sensei they had agreed to bring as much equipment as they could. They

were all ready to believe that this was going to be ninja training from hell.

"What sort of place is this?" Naruto asked out loud.

"It's called the Forest of Death gaki." A voice whispered in his ear.

"Ack!" Naruto jumped out of the way and turned around with a kunai in his hand to find an amused Anko standing there grinning down at him.

From the reaction of his teammates neither of them had noticed her either.

"If this were a real mission and I was the enemy all three of you would be dead," she told them pleasantly. "I want you to keep that in mind. All the jutsus and chakra in the world do you no good if you get your throat slit while you're not paying attention. That's something we'll be working on over the next 30 days."

At the mention of slitting throats Naruto couldn't help but shudder slightly. He remembered the feel of her kunai pressed to his neck from their initial meeting.

"Sensei," Sakura questioned. "What is this place? Are we really training here for a whole month?"

Anko began to twirl a kunai about one of her fingers. "That's right pinky. This is Training Ground 44, though most leaf nin just refer to it as the Forest of Death. It's a massive area with a circular perimeter and a base located at the very center. Inside you'll find every sort of poisonous plant and insects along with a host of deadly predators. Even without actual enemy ninja to worry about it's incredibly dangerous, you can get yourself killed in all sorts of ways. Normally a team fresh out of the academy wouldn't be allowed near this place." She flashed them all a big smile. "I had to get special permission from the Hokage to use it."

"And the old man actually agreed?" Naruto said horrified. "Does he want to get us killed?"

"Just the opposite gaki. He wants you to become a strong team able to deal with anything. Trust me, once you get through your training here a real mission will seem like a breeze. I guarantee you that once you get done with *my* training regimen you'll be head and shoulders above the other two rook squads who were commissioned."

"Which other squads passed?" Sakura asked curious.

"Teams seven and ten with Hatake Kakashi and Sarutobi Asuma as the senseis. I know them both; their lazy bastards who will just have their teams do a bunch of D-ranks and expect them to figure things out on their own. I have a whole different philosophy on things. As my bastard of a sensei used to say; 'the strongest steels are forged from the hottest fires and greatest pressures.' For the next thirty days you'll be trained and tested constantly in all sorts of ways."

"Team 7 passed?" Naruto grumbled. "Naturally that Uchiha bastard made it."

Anko raised an interested eyebrow. "Oh ho, got a little rivalry going with Sasuke do you?"

"Ah, I wouldn't call it a rivalry sensei," Sakura put in. "Naruto would try and challenge him and Sasuke would always just ignore him."

"I really hate that arrogant prick," Naruto said with feeling. "Everybody just loves him and he doesn't even appreciate it!" For someone like Naruto who had to fight so hard for acknowledgement Sasuke's disdain for others was just infuriating.

"Don't worry about the Uchiha," Anko told him happily. It was always good to know which buttons to push to motivate someone. "By the time we're done here you'll be on a whole different level. Now come

on let's get started." Without further ado she leapt up and over the fence.

With a grimace Naruto and the others followed after her.

"Now to begin with, a team needs to be able to work together to blend all their strengths and cover up all their weaknesses. That's how we make the whole greater than the sum of the parts. You'll learn how to work together so that you can maximize each other's abilities. First step in that is for each of you to show what you can do to your teammates. Don't hold back and don't keep any abilities secret from your team or from me. Knowing what you're capable of may make the difference between life and death one day. I **do** expect you to keep what you can do a secret from everyone else though."

She sent a pointed look Naruto's way.

"I know," he said. "The Hokage already explained it to me."

Sakura blinked. She already knew Naruto had direct access to the Hokage and that he would often visit him and always be permitted to meet with him. Just why this was had always been a mystery. Yet if Anko-sensei was bringing this up it had to be something important.

"Naruto what is this about?"

Naruto looked at his sensei and waited for her to nod before he explained.

"The day we graduated I met with the Hokage and he gave me a special jutsu to study."

"What sort of jutsu?" Shino spoke for the first time since their initial meeting.

"I think a demonstration is in order," Anko said. "Let's all give him plenty of room first though."

" Senko Tanken."

For just an instant a yellow sphere flashed into existence around him. In the next all the vegetation within that area became mulch. Even the grass was sliced down to the top of the ground. A couple large trees had been at the edge of his jutsu's effective area. They were both sliced neatly along a curve matching where the edge of the jutsu had been.

Crack.

One of the trees shuddered and slowly fell over as the remainder of its trunk snapped.

Sakura stood here with her jaw hanging open.

Shino actually raised *both* eyebrows.

"Just so you know," Anko added. "This jutsu will slice up chakra reinforced steel like it was cardboard. *Anything* within range of this jutsu will be destroyed."

"Wow! Naruto that's amazing!" Sakura exclaimed.

Shino was nodding his head in full agreement. "A very impressive technique."

Naruto was grinning from ear to ear. "Thanks."

"We'll need to develop a signal before you use it in the field to make sure your teammates are far enough away from you. Both of you keep in mind that this jutsu doesn't pick and choose. If you're within range you'll get sliced up. Pay attention to his warning and stay clear of him so he can use it safely."

Both of his teammates nodded.

"Now since Sakura has no special abilities, why don't you go next Shino?"

"Hey!" Naruto interrupted. "Sakura has tons of special abilities!"

"I'm not interested in her, 'Study for the test no jutsu.' She looked over at Sakura. "Do you have any special fighting techniques or abilities I should be aware of? Can you use any jutsu beyond the three D-rank ones every academy graduate knows?"

Put on the spot Sakura could only shake her head. "No sensei."

"Then as I was saying, Shino if you would."

"Hai sensei."

From out of nowhere a swarm of bugs appeared.

"Ewwww! Gross!" Sakura shouted.

"Quiet pinky," Anko growled.

"My clan, the Aburame, use kikai insects as ninja tools," Shino explained. "They reside within our bodies and are allowed to feed off of our chakra. In exchange we are able to use them in combat to drain an opponent's chakra or to track or keep watch."

"You've got bugs actually living inside you?!" Sakura cried out and shivered.

"That is correct."

"Cool," Naruto said.

"As for me," Anko said. She stopped twirling her kunai and used it to slice open her thumb. She then ran through some hand signs. "

Kuchiyose no Jutsu."

There was a large puff of smoke.

When it cleared Anko was riding a top a fifty foot long red and black snake. "I can summon snakes. I have plenty of other skills too and you'll get to see them over the next month." With a wave of one hand she dismissed the snake which vanished in another puff of smoke.

Standing there Sakura suddenly felt, very very underpowered. *I really am the weakest one here.*

"Now then," Anko began twirling her kunai again. "Let me explain to you what the training will be like."

Author's Notes: I am open to suggestions for the code word or code phrase Naruto will use to warn his team. It cannot be longer than one or two words.

Month in Hell

Author's Note: And the winner is...

"Flash," Naruto suddenly said.

"What?" Anko asked.

"That'll be the code word," Naruto said looking and Sakura and Shino. "When I say flash that's the signal I want to use Senko Tanken."

"All right then," Anko told him. "Whenever you want to use it you'll call, 'flash.' When you two hear him say that word get clear of him. When you're a safe distance call, 'clear.' Once you hear that Naruto you are free to use senko tanken."

All three of them nodded their understanding.

"All right then, now back to what your training will be like. For the next thirty days I am going to cram every damn thing I can into you three. So far as I'm concerned the academy teaches you squat, your *real* education begins now. I'm going to turn thee into killers."

The way she was smiling at them made even Shino a tad nervous.

"When we're done here we won't waste time with dog walking or chasing after stray pets, we'll be going on serious missions that will involve actual danger. That means you will need to be genuine ninja."

"What are you talking about?" Naruto demanded. "We're already ninja!"

"That so?" Anko asked pleasantly.

Moving faster than he could follow Anko covered the short distance between them and delivered a brutal kick right to his stomach. It doubled him over and dropped him to the ground.

"What are you doing?" Sakura shouted and ran over to help him. She glared at her sensei as Anko simply stood there over a doubled over Naruto who was groaning and clutching his stomach.

"Just giving a quick demonstration of what a *real* ninja can do. Having a killer technique does you no good at all if you can be taken out and killed just like that." She snapped her fingers. "Or do you expect your enemies to stand there patiently and give you time?"

With Sakura's help Naruto shakily got back up to his feet. He sent his teacher a stern and angry glance. "That was no fair! I wasn't ready."

In answer Anko kicked him in the stomach again, once more doubling him over.

"Hey!" A furious Sakura shouted.

"You be quiet Pinky." She bent over to address Naruto who was on the ground again. "'I'm not ready' is **never** an excuse for a shinobi! This may shock you but enemy ninja aren't going to announce themselves and make sure you have a fair chance. You have to be on your guard every single moment! The second you relax on a mission is the second you get a kunai in the back. A *real* ninja never lets his guard down! This isn't the academy anymore. In the real world fights are short and nasty, and any dirty trick is fair game. You never want to have a fair fight! You always want to hit them when they're not ready! The ideal fight is to take the other guy down in one shot before he even knows you're there!"

Sakura again helped her boyfriend to his feet.

As soon as he was up Anko kicked him again.

This time Naruto got both arms down to block. Anko nodded approvingly. "See? Now you're learning."

"You know I think this counts as child abuse," Naruto told her.

Grinning she tapped his hitai-ite. "Good thing your not children then huh?"

"Is this what you're going to do to train us?" Sakura demanded.

"Yes as a matter of fact," Anko told her. "During the day time I'll work with helping you on your physical stamina, your taijutsu, weapons use, chakra control, tracking, and stealth techniques. During the night I'll be the enemy." She was giving them a much too friendly smile. (Her team would soon learn to dread seeing it much more than her scowls.)

"What does that mean?" Naruto asked nervously.

"It means that when the sun goes down I stop being sensei and I become the enemy. I am liable to attack you at any time. You'll need to always be prepared. If you spot me at any time between sun down and sun up I expect you to treat me like an enemy shinobi and come at me with intent to kill. Ah, except no senko tanken," she added hastily.

"You want us to come at you with intent to kill?" Sakura said sounding appalled. "What if we actually kill you by mistake?"

"I wouldn't worry about that," Anko said sounding amused. "I'd be more worried about survival."

Naruto was still rubbing his wounded belly. "You're not really going to try and kill us are you Anko-sensei?"

She smiled at them.

The three Genin didn't find that very reassuring at all.

Day 2

Anko returned to the ruins of the small camp team five had set up in a clearing in the forest.

The once neat camp was now nothing but ashes a few scattered bits of broken and twisted metal. Up in the trees three ninja were still tied helplessly to branches. Below them a pair of hungry tigers were pacing back and forth.

"Shoo kitties," Anko chided and threw a handful of shuriken and kunai at them. The tigers growled at her, but decided to flee into the forest.

"Oh dear what happened here?" She called up to her squad.

"YOU DAMN WELL KNOW HAPPENED YOU CRAZY PSYCHO BITCH!!!" Naruto screamed at her.

"Calm down Naruto that's not helping!" Sakura told him.

"Sensei," Shino spoke in his usual calm monotone. Not sounding even slightly put out. "We were attacked by an enemy ninja shortly before dawn. Our camp was destroyed and we were left in our current state."

"Really? Well that's too bad. I guess you three will just have to build a shelter and make do without your comfy sleeping bags. That shouldn't be so tough for a bunch of ninja though." She sat herself down and began to twirl a kunai about one finger.

"Aren't you going to untie us?" Naruto asked pleading.

"Nope," she answered cheerfully. "Every ninja should be an escape artist, this looks like a good opportunity for training."

Sakura was the first to get herself free. She tried to help her teammates but Anko ordered her not to. Shino took an additional

fifteen minutes to get loose, while Naruto remained tied up for close to two hours.

Day 6

Near the top of the seventy foot tall tree Naruto lost focus for just a second and slipped.

"Yaaaaaaaaahhh!" He screamed as he plummeted towards the ground and saw his life flash before his eyes.

At the last possible instant a hand grabbed him roughly by the collar and brought his fall to a sudden wrenching halt.

"You need to concentrate gaki," Anko told him crossly. She did not bother to ask if he was all right before dumping his ass on the ground. "The whole point of tree walking is to teach you better chakra control. Now get back up there! I want you to climb up and down this tree fifty more times!"

Naruto knew better than to try and argue with her. With a groan he got back on his feet and began once more to walk up the side of the massive tree.

Day 11

A punch to the face knocked Sakura down. Taijutsu had never been her strong point. The spars against her sensei were driving that point home. Anko said she was taking it easy on them and claimed the fact they were still alive and didn't have any permanent injuries was proof of that. Easy didn't mean gentle though, she beat on all three of them every morning while sparring. Naruto always recovered quickly but she and Shino were covered in bruises.

"Sensei, I've decided I want to be a medical ninja," Sakura told her.

Anko appeared mildly surprised by the sudden declaration, but not put out by it. "All right, that's actually not a bad idea. Given your level of chakra control that would probably be a good move for you. Were you interested in medical jutsu back at the academy?"

"No sensei," she answered honestly. "I just thought it would be a good idea to help me and my teammates survive."

Day 15

Naruto stood absolutely still within the thick grass. His breathing was shallow and controlled. He deliberately focused on compressing all of his chakra, reducing his chakra signature to make it harder for an enemy ninja to notice him.

Anko had explained to them that experienced ninja could sense chakra; both in an active jutsu and in another shinobi. That meant, among other things, that simple jutsus like henge were worse than useless on infiltration missions. They worked great among civilians who couldn't sense chakra, but were a dead give away against ninja.

Along with everything else she was teaching them how to suppress their chakra signatures, how to move silently, and remain hidden. His clothes right now were covered in mud and bits of grass to help him blend in.

Since the start of this intensive training he'd gotten much better at becoming and remaining invisible.

A sudden hail of shuriken forced him to leap away and flee as Anko attacked him.

Yes, he was better at it, but he still had a ways to go.

Day 21

It was a little after 3 a.m. and Anko was approaching their latest camp site all set to once more blow it up and send the little brats scrambling.

She landed by a nearby tree branch.

She noticed something was wrong just in time. She leapt away just before a sharpened spike snapped up to the spot where she'd been.

"She set off trap number 4," Shino called. "She is twenty yards ahead of us fifteen yards to the right."

"I see her!" Naruto shouted savagely.

A hail of sharpened steel came her way and she had to dodge seriously to keep from being hit. Her three students were coming at her as a unit with blood in their eyes. It was the first time they'd tried to set an ambush for her.

She smiled like a proud parent.

She then proceeded to blow up their camp anyway and beat each of them up before tying them to a tree again.

Day 25

"Here," she tossed a scroll to Naruto and one to Sakura.

"What is this?" Sakura asked suspiciously. They'd learned to be especially wary when sensei appeared to be nice.

"Your basics have improved enough to where I'm going to concentrate on ninjutsu training for the last five days we're here." She told them. "That scroll contains a few basic medical jutsu. I'm not a medic nin myself but you should be able to pick up the basics studying it. Later on, if you have a talent for it, I'll get you a real medic nin to help you."

"Th... thanks sensei," Sakura answered. She was actually surprised to receive help that didn't include a beating attached to it.

"What about me?" Naruto asked looking at his scroll. He hadn't opened it yet, it would be just like Anko to give him something that would blow up.

"That scroll is from the Lord Hokage. He wants you to have a non-lethal option to fall back on in combat. He doesn't want you to only have senko tanken and three academy justsus to rely on. That scroll is for a B-rank jutsu called, 'yoroi.'"

"Yoroi no Jutsu?" Naruto asked curiously opening up the scroll.
"Armor technique?"

Anko nodded. "It allows you to temporarily encase all of part of your body with chakra 'armor.' It's both a defensive and offensive jutsu. It will protect you from physical attack and will also have the effect of making your body as hard as steel. Your punches will break bones and go through walls."

Naruto's eyes widened excitedly.

"Can I learn this too?" Sakura asked hopefully.

"You could but it wouldn't be very useful for you. It requires a lot of chakra. For Naruto it's perfect since he has such immense reserves, for you it would really only make sense as an emergency technique."

"Is there nothing for me?" Shino asked. For once there was a trace of emotion in his voice. He sounded slightly petulant.

"Sorry," Anko told him. "I figured with your clan techniques you didn't need any extra help."

"I see." His voice was its usual empty self, but he looked a little sulky.

The rest of the day was spent focusing on learning jutsus.

Day 30

At long last Team 5 exited Training Ground 44. Their month in hell complete. Though none of them had enjoyed the horrendous experience they were all far stronger now than they had been upon leaving the academy. They were also *vastly* stronger than their two rival rookie squads. They would not truly understand how much they had grown until their first mission.

The next day she and her squad went to the tower hoping to get a nice juicy B-rank, preferably one where combat was almost guaranteed.

The Hokage however insisted that they get at least one regular mission before taking on anything so dangerous. Anko tried to argue but was overruled.

"Well what do you have for us then?"

Sarutobi looked to see what was available. He'd had a good mission earlier; escorting a bridge builder to his home in Wave, but he'd assigned that to Kakashi's team the day before. He found one that would serve as well though.

"Here, this should do." The Hokage handed over the mission request to Anko. It was a low level C-rank to provide security for a three day festival. Perfect for a rookie squad like hers.

She looked it over and sighed. "Well I guess doing one boring mission won't kill us."

"What are we doing?" Naruto asked excitedly.

"We're going to the village of Hikedo in northern Fire Country. We're going to provide security for some priestess during a local festival." She grinned at them. "Piece of cake."

First Rule

Mrs. Haruno did not look happy as she sat at the breakfast table. Her husband had already left for work and so she was left to express their mutual concerns.

"Why do you have to leave the village so soon?" She asked unhappily. "You were gone for an entire month and now you're leaving again? And for a week this time? And why are you going outside the village? Isn't it still too soon for that? I mean you're barely out of the academy. Shouldn't you be doing things inside the village for awhile longer?"

Sakura looked at her mom and did her best not to roll her eyes or sound too impatient. "Mom Naruto and I are ninja now. This is what ninja do, they go on missions for the village! It's not like I can just tell the Hokage it's inconvenient. 'A ninja must embrace his duty without qualm or question. That a duty is placed before him is reason enough.' Twenty first rule of shinobi conduct." She said proudly.

"What if it's dangerous though?"

Naruto laughed around a mouthful of rice. "Like this could be more dangerous than training with that psycho."

"What was that?" Haruno Mai asked nervously.

"Well... ow!" Naruto's explanation was cut off by a swift kick to his ankle and a dangerous look from his girlfriend. "Ah, nothing." He said and rubbed his bruised ankle. Sakura could be surprisingly strong when she was mad.

"There's really nothing to worry about mom." Sakura assured her. "This is nothing but a simple security mission for a festival. it's to give us a little experience. I'm sure it's completely safe."

"If you're providing security then there must be some danger," her mother pointed out.

Now Sakura did roll her eyes. "Mom, it's a festival for some village in Fire country. How dangerous could it possibly be?"

"Anyway Haruno-san I'll be there and I'll definitely won't let anything happen to Sakura-chan." Naruto told her proudly.

Hearing that Sakura frowned ever so slightly. Teammates were supposed to protect each other. The way he'd said that hinted that he thought she *needed* him to watch over her.

Well there's no denying I'm the weakest in the team. She wasn't happy with that. All through the academy she'd been considered one of the best kunoichi. She intended to work very hard with the genjutsu scrolls she'd received and become a strong. She had no intention of being the weak link on her team.

"Anyway mom our sensei will be there and she's *really* strong. I'm sure we'll be just fine."

"I suppose," her mother sighed. "But there'll be other missions won't there? Will those be more dangerous?"

Naruto and Sakura shared a look. They both loved Haruno Mai, but the fact was she and Sakura's father were both civilians. There was no getting around the fact that as ninja Naruto and Sakura both accepted certain facts that they never really would.

"First rule," Sakura said and Naruto nodded his head.

"First rule?" Her mother raised a pink eyebrow.

"The very first thing we were taught at the academy, the first rule of shinobi conduct. 'A ninja must always be prepared to give and accept death.'"

Her mother looked very unhappy to hear that while both she and Naruto accepted it was fact of life.

They'd both had to purchase brand new camping equipment yesterday. They had theirs slung over their backs as they headed toward the wide open gate that led out of the village and into the wider world. Shino was already at the gate with his own equipment patiently waiting.

Naruto's eyes were locked on the road that spread out before him. In his mind's eye endless adventures were out there. New places, new people, incredible battles that was where the road would lead him.

"This is my first time leaving the village," he said.

"Me too," Sakura replied. she sent him an eager smile. "Kind of exciting isn't it?"

He bobbed his head up and down. "Yeah, this is probably the best part about being a ninja, getting to travel and go places."

"Well that's true," an amused voice said from behind him. "Just remember not all those places will be ones you want to visit."

Both of them jumped about to find an amused Anko standing behind them. She had in her hands four small brown paper bags.

"Here," she said and shoved one into each of their hands. She then handed one to Shino as well.

All three of her students looked at the unexpected gifts suspiciously.

"What are these?" Naruto asked nervously.

In reply she opened her own bag and pulled out a stick of dango. "From now on any time we leave the village I'll buy each of you

something from my favorite restaurant. When we come back I'll treat all of you to a meal."

They were all surprised by this unexpected kindness.

"Thank you sensei," Sakura said. "That's really nice of you."

"Think nothing of it," she said as she ate one of her dumplings. "After all chances are one of you will buy it on one of these missions. I'd hate for you not to at least have a decent last meal."

The three of them grimaced.

"Sensei," Shino said in a monotone. "Your rationale leaves something to be desired."

"Whatever," Naruto replied. "Free food is still free food."

Chuckling she led them out through the gate. "All right come along you three, it's be a shame if we weren't there on time to keep this festival from running wild."

They made good time and were half way to their destination when they made camp for the night.

"Now even though we're still in our home country you never take anything for granted and you never relax your guard." Anko told them once they made camp. "We'll keep watch exactly as we would if we were in hostile country and once we get there I'll expect all of you to remember it *is* a mission and not a holiday. I'll let you have some free time to enjoy your selves but while you're on duty remember you represent the Hokage the village and **me**. Don't do anything I'll have to explain to the Hokage or I swear you'll regret it."

She flashed them that too friendly smile that made them nervous.

"Got it?"

"Yes sensei," they all chorused.

Though Hikedo was designated a village, it was actually a prosperous small town of about 60,000. It was the capitol of its prefecture. Entering the village it was easy to see the preparations people were making. Streets were being swept clean and everywhere, on every door and window, people were displaying flowers or green branches. In the middle of the village there was a large open air market place that was crowded with stalls offering different games and tasty foods.

All the people were smiling and in a fine mood.

Naruto at first felt a little weird because the people here weren't glaring at him or ignoring him. When he stopped to think about it he realized that made sense. The people here didn't know who he was. To them he was just a kid with some weird scars. Having people outside his small circle smile at him and treat him the way they treated his teammates was definitely strange.

When you grow up being treated a certain way you just accept that's how things are, and how they are meant to be. He'd learned to simply accept that most people hated him and was just grateful for Sakura, her family, the old man, Ayame, Teuchi and a few others. Without them he thought he might have grown up hating Konoha.

Entering the village Anko had asked the local residents where she might find the mayor and had been directed to the open air market. There they found him. The mayor was a middle aged man with a wide belly dressed in plain work clothes. When they first saw him he had a hammer in his hand and was helping put a stand up.

"We don't worry much about formality here," mayor Binya told them. "Thank you for coming to provide security." He glanced at Naruto, Sakura, and Shino worriedly. "I, uh, had expected your team to be made up of adults."

"You get what you pat for," Anko told him with a smirk. "Don't worry about it, despite being kids they're my team, they can definitely handle themselves."

Hearing her praise them they puffed out their chests a bit.

"Anyway I'm an elite Jonin. I promise you we can handle things during your festival. We'll take care of crowd control and see to it no one causes trouble."

"Crowd control?" Binya blinked at him. "Our own police force can take care of that. That's not why you were hired."

Anko looked surprised. "The request was for security during the three days and nights of your festival wasn't it?"

"No, you *are* here to provide security for the next three days. But not for the festival."

Anko frowned at him. "I'm not a big fan of mysteries, why don't you explain just what my team and I are doing here then?"

The mayor looked around nervously. "Please come with me."

Binya took them out of the village proper and into the nearby woods. About a couple miles from Hikedo they came to a modest wooden house with a small garden. He led them up the stone walkway and opened the door.

Inside was a room empty of any furnishing but a small mat. Hanging on the walls were portraits symbolizing various kami and earth spirits. Kneeling on the mat, and apparently deep in meditation, was a young girl of perhaps eight or nine. She was dressed in a white tunic and loose red pants of a priestess. Her long black hair was tied in a pony tail that ran halfway down her back. She remained where she was kneeling with her eyes closed, not noticing the opening of the door or the five sets of eyes that were watching her from it.

"Her name is Shizuku; she is our Priestess of the Spring." Binya whispered. "Your job is to protect her."

Anko sent him a questioning look. "You went through the expense and trouble of hiring a squad of ninja just to look after one little girl?"

Binya quietly slid the door shut again. "That was because for the next three days she will be in great danger."

"Danger?" Anko parroted. "From what exactly? Just how rowdy do your festivals get?"

Binya nodded solemnly. "I am afraid someone is going to try and murder her."

"Murder?" Sakura gasped.

Anko motioned her to be silent. She was starting to look interested. "Has someone made a threat against her life?"

"You could say that, during each of the last seven festivals our Priestess of the Spring has been found brutally killed. And all of them were children around Shizuku's age."

"Seven murders?" Anko asked.

Binya nodded.

"Do you have any suspects?"

"The entire village," the mayor said sadly.

Anko looked at him stonily. "You're going to have to explain that."

"Hikedo is a very *old* village with many old customs." The mayor looked down in shame. "Among them the custom of human sacrifice. In ancient times a pure and innocent child would be offered up to the spirits of the earth. A boon you might say, her life and blood in return for bountiful harvests and peace within our lands."

"A lot of places used to practice that, but the custom fell out of favor hundreds of years ago." Anko pointed out.

"The same was true here... until seven years ago. The land had suffered four years of bad crops. Drought, flood, hail, early frost, one natural disaster after another was slowly ruining the local farms and farmers. Then seven years ago during the Festival of Spring Renewal our priestess went missing. Each year one girl is selected to act as our Priestess of the Spring. She is brought here to live separate from her family for that time and to devote herself to prayer and meditation. She performs the ritual ceremonies of the festival and then is returned to her family and a new priestess is chosen. But seven years ago our priestess disappeared on the second night of the festival." He shook his head sadly. "She was eventually found in the woods with her throat cut."

"Let me guess," Anko said coldly. "You had a bountiful harvest that fall."

Twitching the mayor nodded. "No one knows who is responsible, or how many people are involved. The people here don't talk about it."

"So basically it's one vast conspiracy?"

"More or less," Binya admitted.

"I can't believe people can still be that barbaric in this day and age." Sakura said.

"Not everyone feels that way!" Binya said. "Most people here are disgusted by the murders, but it's impossible to tell who feels differently. Last year I had my entire police force guarding this place around the clock. But the priestess was still found dead, poisoned. It was impossible to tell when it was done or if it was done with the aid of people on the police force. But it was a possibility."

"So you suspect some of your police are part of the conspiracy?" Anko asked.

"That's right," Binya said. "That's why I decided to send for you. Only people from outside the village can be trusted to really protect her. The custom is that the sacrifice must be made during the time of the festival. Once it's over she will no longer be the priestess and so be safe."

"In that case why don't we just take her away somewhere for the next three days?"

But the mayor shook his head. "The priestess has to be the one to begin and conclude the festival and perform other ceremonies during it. If she isn't here the festival can't take place and the entire village would erupt."

"That's disgusting," Naruto said quietly. "You people are just disgusting. Murdering kids just to try and help yourselves? I can't think of anything worse."

Sakura and Shino both nodded their agreement.

"We don't all feel that way!" the mayor insisted. "Most of the people who live here are decent upstanding citizens."

"Which apparently hasn't kept them from turning a blind eye and keeping their mouths shut." Anko noted. "Seven murders and police involvement in at least one of them? Sounds to me like a pretty big conspiracy. Someone must know something but no one's come forward have they?"

Binya could only shake his head.

"All right, I think I've heard everything I need to." She looked at her students "Team five!"

The three of them snapped to immediate attention and gave her their complete undivided attention.

"Our mission objective has been updated. For the next three days and nights our duty is to protect the girl in there from all harm! No one touches her! No one cuts a hair from her body or spills a drop of her blood while we're here! I expect you to give your lives if necessary to protect her! Got it?"

"Yes sensei!" They shouted back.

Anko turned back to the mayor and gave him a very wide very friendly smile. "Please let everyone in your village know that from this moment until the end of your festival your little priestess is under my protection and the protection of my squad and that anyone who tries to do her harm is dead meat."

The mayor nodded and felt oddly nervous looking at that smiling face.

The client

Author's Notes: Ok to begin with as many of you have noted in your reviews, yes this mission as in my story, 'The Paths We Choose.' To those of you complaining I am not being original or am 'cheating' I only say this; would *another* version of the Wave mission be more original? Honestly? Writing this story this mission immediately came to mind and I thought it would be perfect. Since it **is** my scenario I see no reason why not to use it once more, and *maybe* it will have a different result.

Maybe.

While I ma here I would also like to ask that any of you interested in reading a really good, really detailed, really mature story that is filled to over flowing with lemonny goodness please give 'The Bet' by Mistress Winowyll. I am the co-author though the story is 90% hers and I mostly just edit. It's a wonderfully detailed and sensual tale that I believe many of you would enjoy. If you are interested please just go to my profile page. You will find it listed under favorites.

Finally, any of you who may be interested in discussing your opinions of my stories can go to my new forum to debate them. [www.\(dot\)fanfiction](http://www.(dot)fanfiction.net/forum/LOTLOFs_Fiery_PLayground/75579/)

[.net/forum/LOTLOFs_Fiery_PLayground/75579/](http://www.(dot)fanfiction.net/forum/LOTLOFs_Fiery_PLayground/75579/)

"I'll need a list of all the ceremonies she'll be expected to perform," Anko told the mayor. "What they involve, where they take place, when they begin and about how long they should last."

"I'll have Momo bring you the information. She is Shizuku's caretaker and cooks all her meals for her," Binya said.

"No," Anko said sharply. "If you want her top be a messenger that's fine but she won't have any more contact with the client. We'll take care of the meals from now on."

Binya blushed slightly at the obvious implication. "Momo is a very kind woman she would never..."

"Didn't you just say yourself the whole village is suspect?" Anko demanded. She continued without giving him a chance to respond. "Plus you said the last priestess was poisoned. We will take care of her food. Until this is over we protect her from everyone. "

The mayor looked unhappy, but nodded understanding why it had to be like this. "That's why I hired you to begin with."

"Then leave it to us."

"What are your plans for protecting her?" Binya asked.

"You don't need to know that," Anko told him pleasantly.

"I'm the one who hired you," he objected. "I want to know what you have in mind at least."

"You hired us and when we successfully complete the job you'll be handing me a check. Also you'll be a valuable source of information and assistance to us. **But,**" Anko continued remorselessly. "You have no need to know anything about how we plan to do our job."

"Are you trying to say you don't trust me either?"

"That's right,' she answered not skipping a beat. "The only people I trust right now are my students and that's it. No one beyond the four of us will know the security arrangements."

"I'm the one who hired you," Binya pointed out. "What sense would it make for me to betray you?"

"Maybe the villagers insisted and forced your hand," Anko replied. "Maybe you are involved and hired us deliberately to make it appear that you're not. Then again even *if* we can trust you maybe you have loose lips and you'll pass on what you know without even realizing it." Anko shook her head. "No, the best way to keep something secret is to not tell anyone who doesn't absolutely need to know, and you don't."

"I am the one responsible for her safety," Binya argued.

"Not any more you're not," Anko told him firmly. "From here on out I'll take that responsibility on. We are ninja of the Hidden Leaf and we take our duties very seriously. Since you have hired us why not trust us to do the job?"

"I suppose I'd better," he muttered clearly still not happy. "Very well then, I'll put my faith in you. I'll send someone later today with the information you need."

With that he began the trek back to the village and his work hammering nails.

Anko waited until he was out of earshot. "Shino?"

"Hai sensei?"

"Can you put a tracking bug on him? Also go ahead and put out sentries the way you used to back in the Forest of Death."

Shino nodded.

"You really don't trust him Anko-sensei?" Naruto asked sounding surprised.

"Trust is a very precious commodity Naruto, you should hand it out sparingly." she sounded just the tiniest bit bitter as she said that.
"Now come on, lets introduce ourselves to our new client."

Shizuku was looking calmly at the four ninja who had come to keep her safe. The little priestess had accepted their arrival with a serenity that caught them all off guard.

"I understand that you will be staying here in the shrine," she said quietly. She smiled at them innocently, a child's smile. "No one else ever stays here with me. Nori comes and teaches me and Momo cooks for me, but otherwise I am always alone. I think it will be nice to have company."

"Do you ever have contact with anyone other than your caretaker and your teacher?" Anko asked.

The little girl shook her head. "Everyone else stays away from here and I am not supposed to leave the shrine."

"You must be fun," Naruto muttered. He cut off when Sakura gave him an elbow in the ribs.

Shizuku looked at him. "It's fine, I meditate and pray to pass the time. I know what I am doing is important to the village so I don't mind it."

Naruto was very surprised to find he actually believed her.

"Don't you have any friends? Anyone you can talk to?" Sakura asked sympathetically.

"I have only Nori and Momo," she said. "I... have a mother I have not seen since I became priestess. I would... I would really like to be with kaasan again. But that is not for me to decide."

"What do you mean?" Sakura asked. She couldn't imagine being separated from her mom or dad for a whole year.

"Whether or not I see kaasan again is karma. What will be will be, I cannot change it but only accept it."

Anko gave a rude snort. "Screw karma."

Shizuku looked up at her as though she had blasphemed. "No one can go against the dictates of karma!"

"Listen little girl." Anko told her. "I'm a lot older than you and have seen a lot more than you ever will. We make our own choices in this life. Decide what you want and go get it! don't just sit there and blame it on karma, that's nothing but an excuse."

The little girl stared up at completely at a loss as to how to answer.

"Do you understand the reason why we are here?" Anko asked her.

She simply nodded. "I know that the seven priestesses before me were all sacrificed, and that you are here to try and prevent that from happening to me as well."

"How can you be so calm about it?" Sakura blurted out. "Some people out there want to kill you! Why aren't you scared?"

"Because I have been taught to accept whatever fate is meant for me. Whatever my karma is I accept it," she said tranquilly.

"Crap," Anko pointed a finger at her. "What if your *karma* is to be murdered in the next three days? You really plan to just accept that?"

"Yes," she said.

Anko shook her head. "There are times and places where death is unavoidable, and of course we all have to go one day. That doesn't mean you just accept it. You fight like hell right to the very end." She glanced at her team. "And when your time does come go with a smile and two fingers sticking up in the shinigami's face."

"You shouldn't say things like that!" Shizuku said blushing.

"Why not?. If karma doesn't like it let karma do something about it."

"You cannot oppose what is meant to be," Shizuku told her fervently. "We must all bend before the wind. To resist fate only causes

suffering. Do you not believe in karma at all?"

"Hell no," she said with a sneer. "'Cause, my fate was decided by a pale skinned effeminate son of a bitch not by any mysterious force. Some day I will meet him again and end his miserable life. That's got nothing to do with karma, it's my decision, my will, and I will make it happen no matter what kami or anyone else may think."

Shizuku's eyes widened a bit at the passion and fervor of her words. "But... but aren't you afraid of what will happen if you oppose what fate has in store for you? Whenever a soul opposes its natural destiny only suffering can come as a result."

"Life is full of suffering," Anko told her without a scrap of sympathy. "Get used to it. Don't use it as an excuse not to go after the things you want in life.' She looked closely at the mini-priestess. "What's your dream?"

"What?" She asked in confusion.

"What's your dream?" Anko repeated. "What is it you want from life?"

She looked a little nervous, a little unsure of herself. "I... I don't have a dream; I am ready to accept whatever comes."

"Come on, everyone has a dream, everyone has something they want." She pointed at Naruto. "He dreams of being Hokage one day."

"I am going to be Hokage one day," Naruto said proudly.

"Heaven help us."

"Hey!"

Anko pointed at Sakura. "She wants to have to have the future Hokage there fall in love with her and give him a whole herd of little pink haired kids."

"Gak! Sensei!" Sakura turned a deep red and brought both hands to her mouth.

Naruto turned to look at her and began to blush as well.

She pointed at Shino. "He says he wants to master all his clan's jutsus but really he just wants to be really popular."

Shino looked uncomfortable before he finally shrugged. "That is true."

"You want to be popular?" Naruto asked disbelieving.

"It is a more achievable dream than your becoming Hokage." Shino said his voice having a trace of rancor.

"I don't know Shino, I mean you're pretty creepy."

Behind his shades Shino's eyes narrowed and a faint buzzing sound began to emanate from him.

As amusing as the scene was Anko turned her attention back to Shizuku. "So what do you want?"

She looked down and squirmed a little. "It is selfish to have personal desires."

"Maybe I guess, but everyone has them. Isn't there something you want?"

She was silent for awhile.

"I want to be with momma again," she said in a small voice. "I just want to be with momma again."

Anko nodded. "That's a good dream, if that's what you want you have to be willing to fight for it. My team and I will do everything we can to make it come true so hold on to your dream and fight for it. Okay?"

Shizuku slowly nodded.

After this initial meeting Anko pulled her team aside to talk to them.

"From this point on she will never be alone, someone will be awake and by her side the entire time we're here." Anko said. "Right now I'm going to go out and scout the village as well as the surrounding countryside. You three stay by her side until I get back. Remember that no one is allowed to get near her now, and that includes Binya and her teacher and caretaker. We don't know what sort of threats she'll face or when they'll come so don't let your guard down for even a second."

"Uh," Sakura spoke up. "What do we do if she's actually attacked?"

"You stop the attackers," Anko replied simply. "Using whatever force is necessary."

She looked directly at Naruto.

"That includes using Senko Tanken."

The first kills

Anko returned from her reconnaissance mission after a few hours without incident. She drew a basic map of the village and surrounding area and Shizuku helped fill in some details. A messenger arrived with the list of ceremonies to be performed and she and her team planned out the security arrangements.

It began shortly before noon the next day.

The streets of the village were crowded by local residents who cheered and bowed respectfully as the Spring Priestess made her way to the local temple to officially begin the Festival of Spring Renewal.

Walking at her side was Sakura. She tried to look relaxed as the center of attention for the entire village was walking beside her. Her eyes darted through the crowd searching for any possible threat. So far as she could tell though the people were just genuinely celebrating and happy.

She was trying to look underneath the underneath.

How many of the people cheering were plotting Shizuku's death? Even those who weren't had to know about what had happened to the previous seven girls who had walked down this exact same road towards this same temple. Did they just not care? Or were they happy at the prospect of Shizuku's sacrifice and a bountiful harvest?

"There is no need to look so concerned Sakura-san," the little priestess told her easily. "Whatever will be will be."

Sakura looked over at her calm face. "You really aren't worried at all are you?"

"No," Shizuku replied. "If it is my fate I accept it."

Sakura shook her head. "I'm not sure if I admire you for your calm or just think you're crazy."

"Aren't ninja also taught to accept death?" Shizuku asked curiously.
"Don't you also sacrifice yourselves for your village?"

"That's different," Sakura said primly. "We ninja are *warriors*. We defend the village with our courage and skill and perform the missions that make our village prosper. While it is true that we may die in service that is a risk we all accept. We don't just sit around waiting to die. Ninja *act* we fight and we struggle to fulfill the mission and if we die or if we are forced to sacrifice ourselves to complete the mission..." She shrugged. "That is the price for what we do. No ninja though would just tamely lie down and die."

"I see," Shizuku said quietly. "What about killing? As a priestess I am taught to harm no living thing. Does killing others not bother you?"

Sakura's lips twisted downwards and she lost that air of confidence and certainty she'd had just a moment ago. She was thinking of Chibi and how hard it had been to kill him.

"I haven't killed a person yet and truthfully I'm not looking forward to it. However, 'The world is an unforgiving place. Be forthright and have no doubts of what is required of you.' That's the twenty first rule of shinobi conduct. The world wouldn't need ninja if it were a gentle place. We have to be willing to do whatever is required of us no matter how hard it is."

"I see," she answered sadly.

They walked on down the road for a bit.

"So Naruto is really your boyfriend?"

"That's right," Sakura said happily.

"So what's it like to kiss a boy?"

Sakura stumbled and nearly fell.

From a nearby roof top Anko frowned. she would have to have a word with Pinky later about maintaining your concentration. Scanning the crowd from her hidden position she saw no threats. She and her two other students were keeping watch from above where they had a better viewpoint. she was sure she could act in time if she saw any danger emerge from the crowd.

She dashed unnoticed another block down the parade route and again took up station. Shizuku would be under her watch the entire time.

The first day of the festival went exactly as planned.

They were able to escort Shizuku back to the shrine without any trouble at all. Anko had originally thought she would be able to give her students some free time to enjoy themselves and scout. reluctantly she had decided it would be better to keep her team together. As they sat around to a nice dinner she listened silently as her team talked.

"This mission has been a piece of cake so far," Naruto gushed. "Maybe whoever it was has gotten scared off since there are ninja here protecting Shizuku."

"Cha! Well we are leaf ninja! Who wouldn't be scared?" Sakura agreed.

Shino sat stoically at the table. "I find that an unreasonable hypothesis as our visible presence was somewhat less than intimidating."

Naruto looked at his teammate. "What?"

"He means a bunch of killers aren't going to be scared off by a twelve year old girl with pink hair." Anko said with a smirk.

"Hmph," Naruto crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah well I still bet whoever it is got nervous when they found about us."

"We'll see."

"Sensei," Sakura asked. "You don't think the enemy has been scared off?"

"I think it's very early in the mission," Anko told her.

Late that night five men dressed in black moved through the woods to the edge of the clearing surrounding the shrine. They huddled together and looked over the darkened shrine. Even with its lights off they could see it clearly thanks to the moon.

"Remember, there are ninja in there. We need to be careful." One of the men whispered.

"Is this a good idea?" Another asked.

"It has to be done," the first one said.

"What if the ninja are awake?" A different man said nervously.

"It's three in the morning, I'm sure they're all asleep."

"Want to bet?"

The five men were startled and looked up to see three children sitting on tree branches.

The blond boy who had spoken had a huge smile on his face. "So are you guys lost or something?"

A pink haired girl spoke while kicking her heels back and forth.
"They're all dressed in black. Maybe they're playing ninja!"

"Perhaps they are here to attempt to assassinate our client," a boy wearing shades thought it was night said.

The other two looked over at him.

"You really suck at the whole sarcasm thing, you know that?" The blond boy said.

The men meanwhile had pulled out an odd mix of weapons from an old rusty sword, to a pair of axes, a club, and even a scythe.

"We don't want to have to fight you. Please just get out of the way." One of the men said.

"You children don't want to fight us," another warned.

Hearing that all three of them laughed.

"Sorry," the blond boy said. "If you had *any* idea what we went through during the last month you'd know how silly it is to try to and threaten us."

The three ninja leapt down and attacked catching the men by complete surprise. Despite being armed, having a major size advantage, and outnumbering the ninja 5 to 3 the adults were all quickly beaten unconscious.

Team 5 had been forced to fight as a unit against their sensei and thought nothing at all of taking on amateurs who were dressed up as ninja. That they had no real experience fighting either as a group or as individuals told. team 5 was able to overwhelm them without even having to use any jutsus, simple taijutsu was enough. In short order they were down on the ground and tied up.

When Shino's kikai bugs had detected intruders Anko had sent them out to deal with the problem without a second thought. Having

survived her training for a month she had faith they could handle a few farmers.

When she came out to talk to the prisoners she was in an expansive mood.

"Now you're going to tell us everything you know about the plot to kill Shizuku."

"We're not telling you a damn thing!" One of them snarled.

"Resistance, that's cute!" She began twirling a kunai about one of her fingers and glanced over at her squad. "I'll bet my share of the mission check that I can have him squealing inside of five minutes. Any takers?"

Her students shook their heads. "Sucker bet," Naruto muttered under his breath.

Anko smiled proudly, the kids were starting to learn.

"You can't do anything to us," the same man said trying to look confident while tied to a tree. "We're citizens of Fire country! We have rights!"

"Rights?" That really made her laugh. "Now that really is cute! I like you! For someone who was coming here to murder a little girl you're all right. I think I'll go easy with you and just start with your pinky."

"What do you mean?"

Crack!

He was screaming in sudden sharp pain.

Anko only had to break one more finger to get him talking. She managed it in less than two minutes.

They were confessing everything they knew and the more they talked the more the jovial mood darkened.

Anko had taken the mission seriously from the moment she'd heard the details from the mayor. She'd been confident though that she and her team could handle it. If what she was hearing was true then this mission was of a much larger scope than she'd ever imagined.

She'd worked for the torture and interrogation section of the ANBU under Ibiki and was expert at spotting lies. The prisoners seemed to be spouting nothing but the truth and she seriously doubted any of them were capable of fooling her.

When they'd finished spilling their guts she had a quiet word with Shino and then told her team to let them go.

"We're just going to let them leave?" Naruto said disbelieving.

She sent him a sharp look. "Don't question my orders Naruto!"

He winced at the harsh words and tone and did as he was told helping to free the prisoners. Once released he wasted no time getting away.

As soon as they were gone Anko turned her attention back to Naruto. "Never question my orders, especially not in front of the enemy. You need to have faith in my leadership and I need to trust you to obey my orders without hesitation or question. You're not allowed to just pick and choose which orders you're going to follow."

"Sorry sensei," he said.

His soft answer reduced her anger and she continued in a more reasonable tone. "I happen to believe what they told us. That being the case there's no point in handing them over to the local police and we can't keep them prisoner here, they'd only get in the way. That only leaves killing them or letting them go, and though tempted I'm

not quite ready to start killing prisoners. If we decide arrest them later Shino has placed tracking bugs on all of them."

Naruto silently nodded. Her orders made more sense now.

"As things are we're going to have an interesting morning."

It turned out that what the prisoners had told them was true.

Anko had her team up, fed, and ready well before dawn. Shizuku was left alone in the shrine while Naruto, Sakura, and Shino waited outside. The sun was just over the horizon when their sensei returned.

"They were telling the truth about what would happen if they failed," Anko announced. "I count about a hundred men coming up the path, all of them armed with this or that." She sounded grim but not at all nervous.

About ten minutes later they saw a long line of men approaching them. About half of them wore leather jerkins covered by coats with badges pinned to them. Each of them wore a short sword belted on. The rest of the crowd approaching them wore different sorts of outfitts and carried a wide variety of weapons ranging from axes to spears to swords and sickles. They came up to the edge of the clearing and stopped. Anko and team five were all standing there waiting patiently.

One of the men who wore a badge crossed the clearing to speak to her. "I am captain Hotaka, commander of the Hikedo police force. We've had word of an incident last night."

"Nothing we couldn't handle," Anko told him pleasantly."

Hotaka frowned. "Mayor Binya has decided that it would be best to leave the priestess's safety in our hands."

"Really? He went to the trouble of hiring us in the first place because he didn't trust his own police force with protecting her."

"The mayor has since had a change of heart," Hotaka told him. "We realize we have wasted your time and apologize for that. We will still pay for the full cost of your services, but we'd like you to leave now."

"I am afraid that would be impossible," Anko told him. "My team and I were dispatched here to complete a mission and that is exactly what I intend to do."

"Your mission is over now; we'll take care of the girl."

Anko gave no reaction at all, merely smiled at him and began to twirl a kunai about her finger. "I am afraid you don't have the authority to cancel this mission," Anko said. "I think it would be best for you and your men if they turned around and left."

"I can't do that," Hotaka said menacingly. "Stand aside or me and my men will use force," Hotaka said.

"You and your men are welcome to try."

"If you do not stand aside what happens next will be on your head."

"I'm just fine with that," Anko told him sweetly. "I am responsible to my Hokage to carry out the missions assigned to me. I'll be damned if I'll go back with my tail between my legs on the say so of some local sheriff."

"Fine then," he stomped back over to his men.

"Naruto," Anko said kin a low voice.

"Yes sensei?"

"That jutsu is authorized," she said firmly. "Use it as often as your need to to stop the enemy."

Naruto only had time to nod once before Hotaka gave his men a signal. As one they drew their weapons and gave a shout as they ran straight across the field to try and overwhelm them with sheer numbers.

Naruto looked at them and made the decision.

"Flash," he said.

Three figures leaped away.

"Clear," Anko said.

"Clear," Sakura said.

"Clear," Shino said.

Naruto hesitated and held his ground waiting for the enemy to get close. He waited until they were nearly on top of him.

"Senko Tanken."

There was a flash of yellow as a dome appeared centered on Naruto. Twenty to twenty five men were within ten yards of him running and screaming at the top of their lungs. They were living breathing men.

And then they weren't.

Naruto felt a mild heat and then felt blood splash onto him. His mouth had been open and he got a mouthful of salty hot blood. He spat it out as fast as he could but couldn't keep from swallowing some. His face, his clothes, his hands, his feet were drenched in blood and bits of meat.

All around him the grass was watered with it and the air was left with a fine red mist.

At the edge of the jutsus range three bodies dropped to the ground chopped in $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$. Two men began screaming, not in anger but in pitiful agony. One had lost a leg from just below the knee. Another an arm and a leg. The appendages sliced off in a perfect curve.

These were Uzumaki Naruto's first kills.

They marked the beginning of the Bloody Flash.